Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

http://www.archive.org/details/mohawksnovel01brad

MOHAWKS

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "VIXEN,"
"ISHMAEL,"

ETC.

[Mary Elizabeth Maxwell]

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON
JOHN AND ROBERT MAXWELL
MILTON HOUSE, SHOE LANE, FLEET STREET
AND
ST. BRIDE STREET, LUDGATE CIRCUS, E.C.

[All rights reserved]

1886

LONDON :
ROBSON AND SONS, LIMITED, PRINTERS, PANCRAS ROAD, N.W.

PR
4989
M33m
v.1

CONTENTS OF VOL. I.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	"ONE THAT DOTH WEAR HIMSELF AWAY IN LONENESS"	1
II.	"A TEDIOUS ROAD THE WEARY WRETCH RETURNS"	40
III.	"AND TO THE VIEWLESS SHADES HER SPIRIT FLED"	54
IV.	"HOW BRIGHT SHE WAS, HOW LOVELY DID SHE SHOW!"	75
V.	"I HAVE FORGOT WHAT LOVE AND LOVING MEANT"	110
VI.	"YET WOULD I WISH TO LOVE, LIVE, DIE WITH THEE"	124
VII.	"HOW SWEET AND INNOCENT'S THE COUNTRY MAID!"	144
VIII.	"HE SPRINGS TO VENGEANCE WITH AN EAGER PACE"	177
IX.	"BY VOW OBLIGED, BY PASSION LED"	212
X.	"AND SUDDENLY, SWEETLY, MY HEART BEAT STRONGER"	280
XI.	"AND BEAUTY DRAWS US WITH A SINGLE HAIR"	290
XII.	"LOVE IN THESE LABYRINTHS HIS SLAVES DETAINS"	304

555675

MOHAWKS

CHAPTER I.

"ONE THAT DOTH WEAR HIMSELF AWAY IN LONENESS."

"NOTHING?" asked the farmer, standing upon a heathery knoll, with his gun under his arm, and his two clever spaniels, Nell and Beauty, crouched dutifully at his feet.

"Nothing but this," answered the farmer's man, holding up a bundle of papers—pamphlets and manuscripts—dirty, crumpled, worn as if with much carrying to and fro over the face of the earth. They were tied up in a ragged old cotton handkerchief, and they had been carried in the breast-pocket of yonder wayfarer who lay stark and stiff, with his dead face staring up at the bright blue sky of early morning. A little child, a mere baby, lay asleep beside him,

nestling against the arm that would never again shelter or defend her.

It was a bright clear morning late in September, just one hundred and seventy-seven years ago, the year of the battle of Malplaquet, and the earth was so much the younger and fairer by all those years—innocent of railroads, speculating builders, gasworks, dust-destructors, sewage-farms, and telephones—a primitive world, almost in the infancy of civilisation as it seems to us, looking back upon those slow-pacing days from this age of improvement, invention, transmutation, and general enlightenment.

It was a year for ever memorable in history. The bloody battle of Malplaquet had but just been fought: a deluge of blood had been spilt, and another great victory scored by the allies, at a cost of twenty thousand slain. Brilliant as that victory had been, there were some who felt that Marlborough's glory was waning. He was no longer in the flush and flood-tide of popularity. There were those who grudged him his well-won honours, his ducal coronet, and palace at Woodstock. There were those who feared his ambition, lest he should make himself a

military dictator, a second Cromwell, or even aspire to the crown. If ever England seemed ripe for an elective monarchy or a republic, it was surely just at this critical period: when widowed, childless Anne was wavering in the choice of her successor, and when poor young Perkin, the sole representative of legitimate royalty, was the chosen subject for every libellous ballad and every obscene caricature of the day.

Very fair to look upon was Flamestead Common upon that September morning, purple with heather, flecked here and there with golden patches of the dwarf furze that flowers in the late summer, and with here and there a glistening water-pool. The place where the dead man lay, stretched on a bank of sunburnt moss and short tawny turf, was at the junction of four roads. First, the broad high-road from London to Portsmouth, stretching on like a silvery ribbon over hill and valley, right and left of the little group yonder—the dead man and the sleeping child, and the two living men looking down at them both, burly farmer in stout gray homespun, and his hind in smock-frock and leather gaiters, a costume that has changed but little within the last two hundred years.

The labourer had left his bush-harrow in a field hard by the common at the call of his master, shouting from the little knoll above the road. Matthew Bowman, the farmer, trudging across the common in the dewy morning-tide, bent on a little partridge-shooting in the turnips on the other side of this heathery waste, had lighted on this piteous group—a tramp, lying dead by the wayside, and an infant, unconscious of its desolation, lying asleep beside him.

What was to be done? Who was to take care of the dead, or the living? Neither could very well be left by the wayside. Something must be done, assuredly; but Matthew Bowman had no clear idea of what to do with father or child. He had made up his mind that the baby owned that dead man as father.

"You'd best take the little one home to my missus," he said at last, "and I'll go on to Flamestead and send the constable to look after this."

He pointed to the gaunt, ghastly figure, with bony limbs sharply defined beneath scantiest covering. A vagrant wayfarer, whose life for a long time

past must have been little better than starvation, and at last the boundary-line between existence and non-existence had been passed, and the hapless wretch had sunk, wasted and famished, on the king's highway.

"What are you going to do with that baby, Bowman?" demanded an authoritative voice on the higher ground above that little knoll where the farmer was standing.

Bowman looked up, and recognised one who was a power in that part of the world; all the more powerful, perhaps, because his influence rarely took a benignant form, because it was the way of his life to hold his fellow-men aloof, to exact all and to grant nothing.

This was Squire Bosworth, Lord of the Manor of Flamestead and Fairmile, owner of the greater part of the land within ten miles of this hillocky wilderness, and a notorious misanthrope and miser; shunned by the gentlefolks of the neighbourhood as half-eccentric and half-savage, feared and hated by the peasantry, distrusted and scrupulously obeyed by his tenants.

His horse's hoofs had made no sound upon the sward and heather, and he had come upon the little group unawares. He was a man of about forty, with long limbs, broad slouching shoulders, strongly-marked features of a rugged cast, reddish-brown eyes under bushy brows, a determined chin, and a cruel mouth.

His voice awakened the child, who opened wide wondering eyes of heavenliest blue, looked about with a scared expression, and anon began to cry.

Mr. Bowman explained his intentions. He would have taken charge of the child for a day or so at his own homestead, while the authorities made up their minds what to do with it. The father would find a resting-place in the nearest churchyard, which was in the village of Flamestead, half a mile Londonwards.

"Let me look at the little one," said Bosworth, stretching out his hand, and taking the infant in his strong grasp as easily as if it had been a bird.

"A pretty baby," he said, soothing it with uncouth unaccustomed hand as he held it against his horse's neck. "About the size of my mother-

less girl yonder, and not unlike her—the same blue eyes and flaxen hair—but I suppose all babies are pretty much alike. Take it to Fairmile Court, fellow, and tell my housekeeper to look after it."

He handed the little bundle of humanity to the farm-labourer, who stared up at him in amazement. Kindness to nameless infancy was a new and altogether unexpected development in Squire Bosworth's character.

"Don't stand gaping there, man!" cried the Squire. "Off with you, and tell Mistress Layburne to take care of the child till further orders. And now, Bowman, what kind of a man is this, d'ye think, who has taken his last night's gratis lodging on Flamestead Common?"

"He looks like a beggar-man," said the farmer.

"Nay, Bowman, that is just what he does not look. A vagabond, if you like, a scapegrace, a spy, a rebel—but not a bred-and-born vagrant. There is the brand of Cain upon his forehead, friend; broken-down gentleman, the worst breed of scoundrel in all Britain."

The farmer looked down at the dead face some-

what ruefully, as if it hurt him to hear evil spoken of that clay there, which those locked lips could not answer. It was, indeed, by no means the kind of face common on the roadside—not the sturdy bull-dog visage of tramp or mendicant. Those attenuated features were as regular in their lines as Greek sculpture; those hands, cramped in the death throe, were slender and delicate. The rags upon that wasted body had once been the clothes of a gentleman—or had at least been made by a fashionable tailor. The man had perished in his youth—not a thread of silver in the rich chestnut of the abundant hair, long, silken, falling in loose waves about the thin throat and pallid ears.

"A well-looking fellow enough before want and sickness came upon him," said the Squire. "Did you find anything about him to give a clue to his name or his belongings?"

"Nothing but this," said Bowman, handing his landlord the papers in the cotton handkerchief.

Squire Bosworth sat with thoughtful brow, looking over pamphlets and manuscripts.

"Just as I thought," he said at last: "the fellow

was a plotter, a tool of the Muggite crew, a hack scribbler, sowing the seeds of civil war and revolution with big words and fine sentences, a little Latin and a little Greek. He found he could not live upon his trash—was on the tramp for Portsmouth, I dare swear, meaning to get out of the country, to make his way to America, perhaps, before the mast; as if his wasted carcass would be worth board and lodging where thews and sinews are wanted! Poor devil! a sorry end for his talents. I'll ride to the village and tell the constable to send for the body."

"And the baby, Squire?" urged Bowman. "Do you mean to adopt it?"

"Adopt! That's a big word, farmer, and means a good deal. I'll think about it, friend, I'll think about it. If it's a girl, perhaps yes. If it's a boy, decidedly no."

He rode off with the bundle of papers in his pocket, leaving his tenant full of wonder. What could the Squire, whose miserly habits and want of common humanity were the talk of the county, what could such as he mean by taking compassion upon a nameless brat picked up on the wayside? What

magical change had come over his disposition which prompted Roland Bosworth to an act of charity?

Nothing was further than charity from the Squire's thoughts as he rode to Flamestead; but he was a man of reflective temper, and he always looked far ahead into the future. Ten months ago his fair young wife had died, leaving him an only child—a daughter of half a year old—and now the child was sixteen months old, and her nurse had told him that she began to pine in the silence and seclusion of a house which was like a hermitage, and gardens which were gloomy and lonesome as a desert wilderness. He had poohpoohed the nurse's complaint. "'Tis you, woman, who want more company, not that baby," he had said; but after this he had been more observant of his daughter, and he had noticed that the baby's large blue eyes shone out of a pale old-looking face, which was not what a baby's face should be. The eyes themselves had a mournful yearning look, as if seeking something that was never found.

"Babies never thrive in a house where there are no children," said the nurse; and the Squire began to believe her.

The child sickened soon after this with some slight infantile ailment, and Mr. Bosworth took occasion to question the doctor as to the nurse's theory. The medico admitted that there was some reason in the woman's view. Children always throve best who had the society of other children. Fairmile Court was one of the finest places within fifty miles of London, but it was doubtless somewhat secluded and silent—there was even an air of gloom. Mr. Bosworth had allowed the timber to grow to an extent which, looked at from the point of view of health and cheerfulness—

"I am not going to cut down my trees to gratify any doctor in Christendom!" cried the Squire savagely; "but if you say my little girl wants another little girl to play with her, one must be got."

This had all happened about a fortnight before that September morning when the fatherless baby was found sleeping so peacefully beside the dead. The Squire had shrunk from introducing a stranger's brat into that stately desolate home of his, which it had been the business of his later years to keep

closed against all the world. In his solitary rides he had reconnoitred many a farmer's homestead where children swarmed; he had looked in upon his gamekeeper's and gardener's cottages, where it seemed to him there was ever a plethora of babies; but he could not bring himself to invite one of these superfluous brats to take up its abode with him, to lie cheek by jowl with his dead wife's fair young daughter—a child whose lineage was alike ancient and honourable on the side of mother and father. His soul revolted against the spawn of the day-labourer or even of the tenant-farmer; and he hated the idea of the link which such an adoption would make between him and a whole family of his inferiors.

Thus it happened that the finding of that friendless child upon the common seemed to Squire Bosworth as a stroke of luck. Here was a child who, judging from the dead father's type, was of gentle blood. Here was a child whom none could ever claim from him, upon whose existence no greedy father or harpy mother could ever found a claim to favours from him. Here he would be safe. The

child would be his goods, his chattel, to deal with as he pleased—to be flung out of doors by and by, when his own girl was grown up, should it so please him, or should she deserve no more generous treatment.

He saw the village constable, arranged for inquest and burial, and then put his horse at a sharp trot, and rode back to Fairmile Court as fast as the animal would take him. The house lay some way from the high-road in a park of considerable extent, and where the timber and underwood had been allowed to grow as in a forest for the last half-century. The result was wild but beautiful; the place seemed rather a chase than a park. The fine old gardens surrounding the house had also been neglected, one gardener and a boy sufficing where once seven or eight men had laboured; but these gardens were beautiful even in neglect. The hedges of yew and cedar, the rich variety of shrubs, testified to a period when country gentlemen deemed no care or cost too much for the maintenance and improvement of their grounds—men of the school of Evelyn and Temple, with whom horticulture was a passion.

The house was a gloomy pile of gray stone, built in the reign of James I. Tall gables, taller chimney-stacks, heavily mullioned windows, and much overhanging greenery gave a picturesque air to the exterior; but within all was gloom—a gloom which had been deepening for the last ten years, when, after leading a wild life at the University, and a much wilder life in London, Roland Bosworth sobered down all of a sudden, left off spending money, renounced all the habits and all the acquaintances of his riotous youth, and began to look after his patrimonial estate. In order the better to do this he took up his abode at Fairmile Court, going up to London by the coach once a week to look after his business in the City, where he was a person of some importance on 'Change. The political arena offering few allurements to a man of his temperament, he had taken to stock-jobbing, which had lately come into fashion. By education he was a High Churchman and staunch Tory, as his father and grandfather had been before him, and his adherence to the tenets of Laud and Atterbury was all the more disinterested, as he rarely entered a

tabernacle of any kind. He affected to be warmly attached to the exiled king, and he was one of those lukewarm Jacobites who contrived to carry on a mild philandering kind of connection with Saint-Germains, so cautious that it could be disavowed at any moment of danger—a feeble and wavering partisanship which helped to keep the cause of the Stuarts alive, and prevented it from ever succeeding.

Things had been going to ruin at Fairmile Court during his absence, money had been squandered by old servants, and his gamekeepers had been sleeping partners with a thriving firm of poachers. But the Squire introduced a new *régime* of strictest economy. He dismissed all the old servants, and was a hard taskmaster to the diminished household which he established in their place. At thirty years of age he had turned his back upon the town, a soured and disappointed man. At forty he had nearly doubled his fortune by successful speculations in the City, whither he went very often by coach or on horseback, as the fancy moved him. At seven-and-thirty he married the youngest daughter of a needy peer,

whose father's necessities flung her into his arms. The uncongenial union, which involved parting from one she devotedly loved, broke the girl's heart, and she died ten months after the birth of her first child. On her death-bed, when weeping mother and conscience-stricken father stood beside her, sensible of the wrong they had done, she had no complaint to make against the hard, cold-hearted man whom she had sworn to honour and obey. He had not been unkind to her. He had loved her after his fashion, and he sat a little way off with covered face and head bowed in grief. He had loved her: but he had loved his money better, and he had done nothing to brighten her young life or to reconcile her to a forced marriage.

"You will be kind to Rena," she said faintly, with white lips, presently, as he bent over her, watching for that awful change which was to part them for ever. In his mind there was no ray of hope to light that parting hour. He was materialist to the core; the things which he valued and believed in were the hard realities of this world. The ethereal had no existence for him.

"You will be kind to Rena?"

Rena, short for Irene: that was the baby's name.

"Kind to her? yes, of course. She is all that will be left me."

"Except riches. O Roland, do not care more for your money than for her."

"She will be a great heiress," said Bosworth.

"Riches do not always bring happiness. Love her, be kind to her!"

Those were the last words the dying lips uttered. She dropped asleep soon after this, her head resting against her husband's shoulder, and so out of that dim land of slumber passed silently into that deeper darkness which living eyes have never penetrated.

The Squire flung his bridle to a groom who had been hanging about the drive watching for his master's return, and stalked into the stately old hall, panelled with age-blackened oak, adorned with many trophies of the battle-field and the chase, and further embellished with the portraits of Mr. Bosworth's ancestors, which he valued less than the

canvas upon which they were painted. He was as proud as Lucifer, but his was not that kind of pride which fattens itself, ghoul-like, upon the dead. The captains and learned judges looming from those dark walls were to him the most worthless of all shadows. The hall was spacious and gloomy, and opened into a still more spacious dining-room, where the Squire had never eaten a dinner since he came of age. A noble saloon or music-room, painted white, and furnished exactly as it had been in the days of Charles II., opened on the other side of the hall; but the only apartments which the Squire occupied on this ground floor were three small rooms at the end of a long passage, which served him as dining-room, study, and office. A steep narrow little staircase built in the wall, which stair had once been a secret means of communication between upper and lower stories, conducted to the Squire's bedchamber and dressing-room. His child and her nurse had their abode in the opposite wing; and thus all the state rooms, constituting the centre and main body of the house, were given over to emptiness.

The establishment was on the smallest scale. There were less than half a dozen servants where there had once been twenty.

No portly powdered footman came to Mr. Bosworth's summons, but a little old man in a very shabby livery shambled along the passage at the sound of his master's bell.

"Has there been a child brought here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Send Mrs. Layburne here."

The man shambled out again. The Squire flung off hat and riding-gloves, and seated himself by his solitary hearth. There were some logs smouldering there, for the September mornings were cool, and the Squire was of a chilly temper. The table was laid for a frugal breakfast of tea and toast; not by any means the kind of meal which would have satisfied the average country gentleman of that era; a scrivener's or a garreteer's breakfast rather.

The Squire poured himself out a cup of tea, and sat sipping it with an absent air, and his eye upon the door.

It was flung open abruptly, and a woman entered,

tall, with noble neck and shoulders, and the carriage of Dido herself—a magnificent ruin. No one could doubt that the creature had once been eminently beautiful; there were traces still of those vanished charms: eyes of velvety brown, full, fiery, splendid, and the outline of fine features. But the skin was withered and yellow, the raven hair was grizzled, some of the teeth had gone, and nose and chin had both become too prominent. The queen had degenerated into the hag.

She was shabbily and carelessly dressed in a black stuff gown, with laced bodice and muslin kerchief. She wore no cap, and her coarse unkempt hair was gathered into a loose knot on the top of her head.

"An extinct volcano," thought the student of character, as he looked at that haggard countenance, with its premature wrinkles and unhealthy pallor. "A slumbering volcano, rather," he might say to himself upon closer scrutiny.

"Well," said the Squire, "I sent you home a child."

"You sent me some beggar's daughter, I should

say, by her rags. I have washed her, and dressed her in some of Rena's clothes. What put it into your astute head to interfere with the people whose duty it may be to take charge of vagrants?"

"I don't usually act without a motive, as I think you know, Barbara. If the child is sound in wind and limb—a healthy child—I intend to adopt her. Rena wants a companion, I am told—"

"Nurse Bridget's fancy. I wonder you lend your ear to an ignorant country wench."

"The country wench is sustained by the doctor, and by facts. Rena has been drooping of late. Another baby's company may enliven her. Have you put them together?"

"Not I," protested Barbara; "it would have been more than my place is worth to act without orders. I never forget that I am a servant. You ought to know that."

"You tell me of it often enough," said the Squire, shrugging his shoulders. "The misfortune is that you never let me forget you were once something else."

"O, but the memory of it never ruffles your

peace," sneered the woman, with a flashing glance at the stern, cold face. "It was so long ago, you see, Squire, and you have a knack of taking things coolly."

"Come and let us introduce the children to each other," said Bosworth, rising; and he followed Barbara Layburne to the further end of the house, where the sound of a crying baby indicated the neighbourhood of the nursery.

It was not the friendless waif who thus bewailed her inarticulate misery. The little stranger was asleep in Barbara's room on the upper story. It was the heiress who was lamenting her infantine woes. Buxom, apple-cheeked Bridget was marching up and down the room, trying to hush her to sleep.

"She's cutting another tooth, sir," she said apologetically.

"She seems to be everlastingly cutting teeth," muttered Bosworth, with a vexed air; "I never come to see her that she is not wailing. Fetch me the other child, Barbara; I want to see them together."

The other child was brought, newly awakened from the refreshing slumber that had been induced

by her bath. Her large blue eyes explored the unknown room, full of a pleased wonder. There were bright-coloured chintz curtains, worsted-work shepherds and shepherdesses framed and glazed upon the flowered wall-papering. The nurseries were the brightest rooms in the rambling old house; had been brightened by the young mother before the coming of her baby.

The nameless child had a sweet placidity which appealed to the Squire.

"I suppose *she* has teeth to cut, too," he said, "but you see she doesn't cry."

"She cried loud enough while I was dressing her," retorted Barbara.

"Put them on the floor side by side," ordered the Squire.

The two infants were set down at his command. They were both at the crawling stage of existence, that early dawn in which humanity goes upon all fours. They seemed about the same size and age, as nearly as might be guessed. They had eyes and hair of the same colour, and had that resemblance common to pretty children. The heiress had a

sicklier air than the waif, and was less beautiful in colouring.

"They would pass for twin sisters," said Bosworth; "come, now, Mistress Bridget, do you think you would know them apart?"

Bridget resented the suggestion as an insult to her affection and her intellect.

"I should know my own little darling anywheres," she said; "and this strange child ain't half so pretty."

"There's a mark she'll carry for life, anyhow," said Barbara Layburne, taking up the stranger, and baring the baby's right arm just where it joined the shoulder. "A burn or a scald, you see, Squire. I can't say which it is, but I don't think she'll outlive the scar."

Bosworth glanced at it indifferently.

"A deep brand," he said, and that was all.

He was watching his own child, who was staring at the intruder with looks of keenest interest. She had left off crying, and was crawling assiduously towards the baby-waif, whom Barbara Layburne had set down upon the floor a little way off. The two

infants crawled to each other like two puppies, and climbed and tumbled over each other just as young animals might have done, obeying instinct rather than reason.

Presently the little lady uplifted her voice and crowed aloud, and then began to talk after her fashion, which was backward, as of a child brought up amidst gloom and silence.

"Gar, gar, gar!" she reiterated, in a gurgling monotone.

The other baby looked about her, and murmured piteously, "Dada, dada!" and seeing not him whom she sought, she began to cry.

"Another fountain!" exclaimed the Squire, turning upon his heel.

He stopped on the threshold to look back at nurse and children.

"You have had your whim, Mistress Bridget," he said, shaking his forefinger at her; "look you that no harm comes of it;" and with that he stalked away, and went back to his den, without so much as a word to Barbara Layburne, who looked after him with strangely wistful eyes.

Then, when the sound of his firm tread had died into silence, she too left the nurse and the babies, and stalked away to her own den.

"A pretty pair," muttered Bridget, as she squatted down upon the ground to play with her charges; but whether she meant the two babies, or the Squire and his housekeeper, remains an open question.

There had been a time when the presence of Squire Bosworth's housekeeper at Fairmile had caused some vague murmurs in the way of scandal; but time accustoms people to most things, and after ten years Mistress Barbara Layburne, with her flashing eyes and her unkempt hair, her majestic figure and her shabby gown, her imperious manners and her menial capacity, came to be accepted as only a detail in the numerous eccentricities of the Squire. Only such a man could have had such a housekeeper.

The tradition of her first appearance at Fairmile was still talked of, and sounded like a fairy tale. She had arrived there late at night, in a coach and

four, during a thunderstorm which was still remembered in those parts. So might Medea have come to Jason in her fiery car drawn by dragons, said the parson, who was an Oxford scholar, and loved the classics. She had arrived in a velvet gown and jewels, with all the style of a lady of fashion. She had been closeted with the Squire for an hour, during which time the sound of their alternate voices in scorn and anger had never ceased. The storm within had raged no less furiously than the storm without. Then had the door been flung open by the Squire, and he had come out into the hall, where he gave an order that a room should be got ready for his unexpected visitor: and, the order given, he had dashed out of the house, mounted into the coach which was waiting before the portico, and had driven off upon the first stage to London, leaving the stranger mistress of the field.

The Squire did not return for a month, during which time the lady had gradually settled down into the position of housekeeper, her status assured by a letter in which Mr. Bosworth bade his old butler obey Mrs. Layburne in all matters connected with

the interior of Fairmile Court. So henceforth it was Mrs. Layburne who gave the cook her orders, and who paid all the bills, and who doled out wages to coachman and gardener. She was every whit as great a niggard as her master, people said; and under her rule the miserly ways of the house began to take a settled form and consistency. Every superfluous servant was dismissed, all luxurious living was put down with a high hand, and the gloom which had fallen upon the abandoned house while Roland Bosworth was leading a life of riot and dissipation in London only grew deeper now that he had returned, a reformed rake, to the hearth of his forefathers.

He came back to Fairmile Court at the end of a month, nodded curtly to Mistress Barbara as he passed her in the hall, and took no more notice of her than of any other hireling. She had established herself in his house; but whatever claim she might have upon his friendship was but little honoured. There were occasional conferences in the little red parlour in which the Squire passed most of his indoor life; there were occasional storms;

but there was never any touch of tenderness to provoke the scandal of the household as to the present relations of master and servant. As to what those relations had been in the past, the neighbourhood, from parson to innkeeper, from high to low, had its opinions and ideas; but nothing ever occurred to throw any clearer light upon the antecedents of the lady who had come to Fairmile in velvet and jewels, which she was never seen to wear again after that night of tempest. She seemed to age suddenly by twenty years within the first few months of her residence in that melancholy house. Her oval cheeks grew hollow, her complexion faded to a sickly sallow, her ebon hair whitened, and deep lines came in the wan face. She never left the boundary of the park; she never had a friend to visit her. A cloistered nun's life would have been far less lonely. If she was by birth and breeding a lady, as most people supposed, she had not a creature of her own grade with whom to hold converse. To the servants she rarely spoke, save in the way of business. She had her own den, as the Squire had his: she read a good deal; and sometimes of an evening, when the

heavy oak shutters were all closed and barred, she would open the spinet—an instrument which had belonged to her master's mother—and sing to it in a strange language, in a wonderful deep voice, which thrilled those who heard her.

The Squire's marriage made no difference in Mrs. Layburne's position, and brought no diminution of her authority. Lady Harriet had no longing for power, and was content to let the house be managed exactly as it had been before her coming. She saw that avarice was the pervading spirit of the household, but she made no complaint; and she was too innocent and simple-minded to have any suspicion of evil in the past history of her husband and his strange housekeeper. It was only when Lady Harriet was about to become a mother that she asserted herself so far as to insist upon some small expenditure upon the rooms which her baby was to occupy. Under her own directions the old nursery wing, in which generation after generation of Bosworths had been reared, was cleansed, renovated, and decorated, in the simplest fashion, but with taste and refinement.

The result of the little stranger's presence fully justified Mrs. Bridget in her opinion. Rena improved in spirits, and even grew more robust in health, from the hour of her little companion's advent. The two children were rarely asunder: they played together, fed together, slept together, took their airings in the same baby-carriage, which Bridget or the gardener's boy dragged about the park, or rolled and crawled together on the grass on sunny autumn mornings. Rena, who had been backward in all things, soon began to toddle, and soon began to prattle, moved by the example of her companion, who had a great gift of language. Bridget was proud of her sagacity, and speedily grew fond of the adopted child, though she always professed to be constant in her affection for Rena, who was certainly a less amiable infant. The little stranger was called Belinda, a name which the Squire had found in one of the dead man's manuscripts.

"It may have been her mother's name," said the Squire, and that was all, though he might have said more had he pleased.

Among those pamphlets and political manu-

scripts he had found three private letters, which to his mind suggested a domestic history, and which served to assure him that his daughter's companion was of gentle birth. He desired to know no more, and he had no intention of inquiring into her antecedents.

The wanderer had been lying in his nameless grave for a little over three years, and his orphan daughter had thriven apace in her new home. The two children had but rarely passed the gates of the park during those years, but they had been utterly happy together in that wooded wilderness, too young to languish for change of scene, renewing every day the childish pleasures of yesterday. They had not yet emerged from the fairyland of play into the cold arid world of work and reality. They played together all day long on the sunlit grass or under the dappled shadows of the trees in spring, summer, and autumn; in winter making a little paradise for themselves in the day nursery before the cheerful fire, into which they used to peer sometimes, with dilated eyes, seeing gnomes and fairies, and St. George and his

dragon, and all the Seven Champions of Christendom, in the burning logs. The shining brass fender seemed to them like a glittering golden gate shutting in fairyland.

How did they know anything of St. George and his dragon, King Arthur, Melusine, and the gnomes and the fairies, at this tender age, when they hardly knew their letters, and certainly could not read these dear old stories for themselves? Easily explained. They had a living book in which they read every evening, and the book was Bridget. Mistress Bridget had more imagination than most of her class, and had spent her superfluous cash with the pedlar, in whose pack there was generally a department for light literature—curious paper-covered books, printed on coarsest paper, and with the roughest and rudest of illustrations; but the Seven Champions and all the old fairy tales were to be found among these volumes, and Bridget had gradually possessed herself of the whole realm of Robin Goodfellow and the fairies.

In the evening, when the stealthy shadows came creeping over the window, and shutting out the leafy

wilderness beyond, the two children used to clamber on to Bridget's knee and ask for stories, and Bridget related those old legends with the uttermost enjoyment. That twilight interval before candles and bedtime was the pleasantest hour in her day.

So the children were happy, having, as it seemed, but one friend in the world, in the person of buxom Bridget. Mrs. Barbara Layburne but rarely condescended to enter the nurseries, and looked askant at the children if she happened to meet them in the corridors or hall. She did not even pretend to be fond of her master's daughter, and for the alien she had nothing but contempt. The Squire himself was at best an indifferent father. He seemed quite satisfied to hear that his daughter was well and happy, and seldom put himself out of the way to see her. Sometimes, riding across the park, he would come upon the two children in their play, and would pull up his horse and stop for a few minutes to watch them. There could not be a prettier picture than the two golden-haired children, in their white frocks and blue sashes, chasing each other across the sunlit

sward, or squatted side by side in the deep pasture grass, making daisy-chains or buttercup-balls. Belinda looked the stronger of the two, the Squire thought. He knew her by her somewhat darker hair and rosier cheeks. His own motherless child had always a delicate air, though she had never had any serious illness.

It was late in the October of that third year when the children's peaceful days came to an end, like a tale that is told, never hereafter to be any more than a sad sweet memory of love and happiness that had been and was not.

The twilight was earlier than usual on that October evening, and night came up with a great threatening cloud like the outspread wing of a bad angel. Mrs. Barbara Layburne stood at the hall-door watching that lowering sky, and listening to the sough of the south-west wind, and thinking of that night just thirteen years ago—that night of tempest and gloom upon which she had first seen yonder elms and oaks in all their garnered might of foregone centuries, standing stern and strong against the threatening wrack. She thought of her life as

it had been before that night, of her life as it had been since.

"Would anybody in London—those who knew me in my glory—believe that I would endure such a long slow martyrdom, a death in life?" she asked herself. "Well, perhaps they would believe, if they could fathom my motive."

The sound of footsteps startled her. Peering into the darkness of the long avenue, she saw a lad running under the trees, sheltering himself as best he might from the driving rain. She watched him as he came towards the house, and hailed him as he drew near. He was the son of the old gardener who lived at the lodge.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"There is a man at the lodge very ill—dying, mother thinks—and he sent this for you, ma'am, and I was to give it into your own hands."

He handed her a scrap of paper, folded but not sealed. It was scrawled over in pencil, with a tremulous hand.

"Come to me at once, if you want to see me alive. —Roderick."

That was all.

"Is he tall, with dark eyes and hair?" she asked.

"Yes. You'd better come at once if you know anything about him. He's mortal bad. And mother said you'd best bring some brandy."

Barbara Layburne went hastily to the store-room, where everything was kept sternly under lock and key. Half the business of her life was to unlock and lock those presses and store-closets, doling out everything to the submissive cook, who still contrived somehow to have her pinch out of this and that. Barbara filled a small bottle with brandy, fetched her cloak and hood, and then went back to the hall, where the boy was waiting.

She went along the avenue, muffled in her gray cloth cloak, a ghostlike figure, the boy following her as fast as his legs would carry him. He declared afterwards that he had never seen any one walk so fast as Mrs. Layburne walked that stormy night, though the wind and rain were beating against her face and figure all the way.

There was a light burning dimly in the lodge as they drew near. The door was open, and the old

gardener was standing on the threshold watching for them.

"Is he—dead?" gasped Barbara.

"No; but his breath is short and thick, just as if he was near his end, poor wretch. He ain't anybody belonging to *you*, is he, madam?"

"Not he," answered Barbara promptly; "but I know something about him. He's the son of an old servant who lived with me in my prosperous days. Where is he?"

"In the kitchen. He was shivering, so the missus thought he'd be better by the fire belike."

The ground floor of the lodge consisted of two rooms, parlour and kitchen. Barbara went to the kitchen, which was at the back, the common living-room of the family. The parlour was for ornament and state—temple and shrine for the family Bible and the family samplers, laborious works of art which adorned the walls.

The sick man was lying in front of the fire, with an old potato-sack between him and the flagged floor. Barbara knelt beside him, and looked into his face,

half in the red light of the fire, half in the yellow flare of the tallow candle.

His eyes were glassy and dim, his cheeks were flushed, his breath laboured and rattled as it came and went. Barbara Layburne knew the symptoms well enough. It was gaol fever—a low form of typhus. That tainted breath meant infection, and the gardener's cottage swarmed with children. He must be got away from there at once, unless they were all to die. Typhus in those days was always master of the field where he had once set up his standard.

The dim eyes looked at her piteously: the lips began to murmur inarticulately.

"Leave us together for a few minutes, Mrs. Bond, while I hear what the poor creature has to say, and think over what I had best do with him. There is no room for him here."

Mrs. Bond retired, shutting the door behind her.

CHAPTER II.

"A TEDIOUS ROAD THE WEARY WRETCH RETURNS."

Mrs. Layburne poured out half a tumbler of brandy, propped the sick man's head upon her arm, and put the glass to his lips. He drank eagerly, gasping as he drank.

"Good!" he muttered, "that does me good, sister."

"Hush! not that word here, for your life."

"Not much use in saying it, eh! when it's no more than a word? Give me some more."

"No, you have had enough for the present. How long have you been out of prison?"

"How do you know I have been in prison?"

"Do you think I don't know gaol fever and gaol clothes? You have got them both upon you. You have escaped out of some gaol."

"Guildford, last night. I was in the infirmary;

got out at midnight, when nurse and warder were both asleep. I had shammed dying, and they had given me over and made themselves comfortable for the night—topers both. I tore up my bed-clothes and let myself down out of the window, dropped into the governor's garden, as neatly as you like for a sick un, and trudged along the roads till daybreak, when I hid behind a haystack, dozed there, and shivered there, and had bad dreams there all day; then, with nightfall, up and on my legs again till I got here. And now perhaps you'll find me a corner to lie in somewhere."

"He must not see you, or you'll soon be in gaol again."

"Curse him!" growled Roderick, "bears malice, does he?"

"He is not likely to forget that you tried to murder him."

"I was in liquor, and there was a knife handy. Yes, if luck had favoured me that night, Squire Bosworth would have come to an early end, and your wrongs would have been righted."

"I would rather right them myself."

"Ah, but you are of a slavish temper, like all women, however high they pretend to hold themselves. You can live here, eat his bread, and be called his servant, you who for years had him at your feet, led him like your lap-dog. I have heard what the village people say of you. This is not the first time I have been in your neighbourhood."

"No, I thought as much. 'Twas you robbed the London coach last December."

"What! you knew my hand, did you, Bab?" he cried, with a hoarse chuckle. His glassy eyes shone with a new light: the brandy seemed to have rekindled the spark of life in him. "Yes; it was neatly done, wasn't it? That knoll above the road was a capital station, and the old fir-trunks hid us. There were only two of us, Bab, and we got clean off with the plunder. But it was my last lucky hit. Nothing has gone well with me since that night. I turned fine gentleman for a month or two on the strength of that haul, and let my hand lose its cunning. And then for the pettiest business you can conceive, a fopling's purse at the Opera, as skinny a purse as you ever saw, Bab, I got quodded, and

narrowly escaped a rope. It was only one of your old admirers, who came forward and spoke to my character, who saved me from the gallows."

"Are you too ill to go on to some safer shelter, if I were to give you some money?" asked Barbara meditatively.

She was puzzled what she could do with him, if he must needs remain on the premises. She knew that Roland Bosworth would show him little mercy. They had always been foes, and one particular scene was distinctly present to her mind's eye, as she knelt there by the kitchen fire, looking down at the pinched face, with the glassy eyes and hectic cheeks.

It was a scene after supper, in a gaily-lighted room, cards and dice lying about on the tables, and on one a punch-bowl, some lemons, and a big clasp-knife. The guests were gone, and they three were alone, and a quarrel had come about between Bosworth and Layburne, a quarrel beginning in a dispute about gains and losses at cards, and intensifying through bitterest speech to keenest, cruellest taunts, taunts flung by the brother in the face of his sister's lover; and then hatred took a more desperate form,

and Roderick Layburne snatched up the Spanish knife—his own knife which he had produced a while ago to cut the lemons—and had tried to stab Bosworth to the heart.

The Squire was the bigger and stronger man, and flung his assailant aside—flung him out of the room and down the steep London staircase, to ruminate on his wrongs at the bottom; and from that night Mrs. Layburne's brother had never been admitted to her lodgings in the Haymarket.

This had happened just eighteen years ago, in the days when Barbara was a famous actress, known to the town as Mrs. Belfield, and had titled admirers by the score. They had never been more than admirers, those dukes and lords who applauded her nightly, and thought it honour and felicity to lose their money at hazard or lansquenet in her luxurious lodgings. The only man she had ever cared for was Roland Bosworth, though he had never been either the handsomest or the most agreeable man among her followers. But women who are admired by all the world have curious caprices; and it had been Mrs. Layburne's fancy to sacrifice herself and

her career to the least distinguished of her admirers. She had her tempers, and did not make her lover's life a bed of roses. Thrice he had been upon the point of marrying her; and each time some wild outbreak of passion or some freak of folly had scared him away from the altar. Then the time came when he wearied of her storms and sunshines, and left her. She followed, content, as her brother said, to become a slave where she had once been a queen.

Roderick groped with his hand for the tumbler, and his sister poured out a little more of the brandy and gave it to him.

"That means the renewal of life," he said, "but not for long. No, Bab; not if you were to offer me a thousand guineas could I budge another mile, on foot or on horseback. I'm on the last stage of my last journey, Bab. The gaol doctor was right enough when he told them yesterday morning it was all over—only he didn't know what stuff I was made of, or how long it would take me to die. Lungs gone, heart queer—that was his verdict. And gaol fever for a gentle finisher. You must find me a corner to die in, Barbara: it's all I shall ever ask you for."

She thought deeply. Take him into the house by a back door, hide him in some room near her own? That might be done, but it would be too hazardous. And when the end should come, there would be the difficulty. It would be more perilous to remove the dead than to admit the living. And then to let putrid fever into the house? Who could tell where the evil would stop? Disinfectants and precautionary measures were almost unknown in those days. Fever came into a house and did its fatal work unopposed.

But there was one vast block of buildings at Fairmile Court, given over to emptiness, buildings which no one ever explored. The old hunting stables, where Roland Bosworth's grandfather had kept his stud, had been disused for the last half-century. Loose boxes, men's rooms, saddle-rooms, dog-kennels: there was space enough for a village hospital.

"If I can but make one of those rooms fairly comfortable!" she thought, remembering how bleak and desolate the rooms had looked when she explored them soon after her first coming.

"I must go and see what I can do," he said

after a pause. "It is early yet, not eight o'clock. I will have you comfortably lodged by ten."

"The sooner the better, for it isn't over-pleasant lying on these stones. If it had not been for that taste of cognac I should be dead before now."

Barbara hurried away, begging the gardener and his wife to keep close till her return, and to be ready to help her then. They were neither now nor at any future time to breathe a word to mortal ears about anything which had happened or which might happen to-night. Then she hastened back to the house with those swift steps of hers, borne onward by the fever of excitement that burned within.

All was quiet at Fairmile Court. The Squire was luckily in London, not expected back till the end of the week. The few servants were snug in the kitchen, with closed doors. Barbara provided herself with a lantern and a bunch of keys, and went out to the old hunting stables, which were further from the house than those smaller stables now in use. She investigated room after room, little dens in which grooms had been lodged, until she found one that suited her. It was in a less dilapidated

state than the others, and was provided with a fireplace, which the others were mostly without. The window looked away from all the other stables and the offices of the Court, and a light burning within would hardly attract notice. The smoke from the chimney would be almost hidden by the roof of a huge old brewery in the rear; and as the brewery was now used as a laundry, and fires almost always lighted there, the smoke from the lesser vent would in all probability be mingled with that from the tall and capacious shaft, and provoke no questions.

With her own hands, Barbara carried coals and wood and tinder-box, mattress and pillows, blanketing and linen, from the house to the groom's bedchamber, where the old furniture—a stump bedstead, a chest of drawers, and a chair or two—still remained. With her own hands she swept the chamber, lighted the fire, and made up the bed. The room had almost a comfortable look in the red glow of the fire. She toiled thus for nearly two hours, with many journeys to and fro in the wind and rain, and before the first stroke of ten, all was to her satisfaction. She had brought food and drink, all things that she could

think of, for the sick man's comfort. It could hardly be much more luxurious than the prison infirmary from which he had escaped, but it had been his fancy to come there to die, and she could but indulge him. He was her junior by eleven years, and there was a time when she had loved him passionately, almost with a maternal love.

She went back to the lodge, and the gardener and she contrived a kind of impromptu ambulance out of an old truck, and a blanket which she had carried with her. The sick man's limbs seemed to have stiffened since he had crawled to that door, and had sunk exhausted upon that hearth.

"There isn't a crawl left in me," he said, as they lifted him on to the truck, and wrapped the blanket round him.

For nearly a fortnight he lay in that lonely room, his sister attending upon him, stealing to his lair again and again every day, often sitting up all night with him, nursing and ministering to him with inexhaustible patience. Her apprehension was of the hour when he should die, and there would be the business of removing him or of accounting for his

presence in that place. It was an intense relief, therefore, when after a fortnight of unwearying attention, with a liberal use of brandy and strong soups, at an expenditure rare in that pinched household, Roderick so far recovered that he was quite capable of being moved to another shelter.

The hand of death was upon him—death's impress visible in hollow hectic cheeks, glassy eyes, and difficult breathing. Consumption was doing its subtle work, but typhus had been subjugated by good nursing.

No sooner had the fever left him than Mrs. Layburne planned how to get rid of the patient. She had the rickety, blundering, old family coach at her disposal whenever she wanted to go to the market-town to buy groceries and other necessaries for the household. Roderick was well enough to put on a suit of old clothes, some cast-off garments of the Squire's which had seen hard service. She helped him to dress, and then directed him what to do. He was to walk as far as he could along the avenue towards the park-gates—or, if he had strength enough, beyond the gates—and was to sit down by the road-

side as a wayfarer who had sunk from fatigue. She would stop the coach, and, affecting to take compassion upon him as a stranger, would offer him a lift to Cranbrook, the market-town. Here she would set him down at the Lamb, a humble little inn she knew of, where, furnished by her with funds, he might remain till he was well enough to resume the struggle for existence. In her heart of hearts she knew that for him that struggle was nearly over, and that it was doubtful if he would ever leave the Lamb. She would have done all she could do for him, and Fate or Providence, God or the Devil, must do the rest. Mrs. Barbara's spiritual ideas were of a very obscure order, and ranked about as high as the tenets of the Indian Devil-dancers, or the Fetish-worshippers of the South Seas.

Roderick assented to her plan. What could he do but assent, having not another friend in the world, and being very anxious to leave that den in the old rat-haunted stables? The coach went lumbering along the avenue one fine afternoon while the Squire was up in London. Roderick had started a good hour before the coach, and he had contrived

to tramp the whole length of the avenue, and pass the gardener's lodge, before the vehicle overtook him.

Barbara stopped the coach, and played her little drama of womanly compassion and charity. Old John Coachman wondered at this unaccustomed beneficence in the housekeeper; wondered still more when she opened the coach-door, and invited the tramp to ride beside her. So well had the gardener and his family kept madam's secret that the house-servants had heard nothing about that strange visitant of Mrs. Barbara's.

She pulled up her coach at the Lamb, and committed her brother, with payment in advance for a month's board and lodging, to the tender care of the landlady, who was a good homely soul, and so left him, with five guineas in his pocket, and the promise of future help, would he but lead an honest life, and keep out of gaol. Then she drove to the market-place, and did her shopping in the sleepy, low-ceilinged, old-established shops, where the tradesmen lived in a semi-darkness, and made a profit of from thirty to fifty per cent upon everything they sold.

"Thank God I am clear of that trouble!" ejacu-

lated Mrs. Layburne, as the coach passed the Lamb again on its way out of the town.

She congratulated herself somewhat too soon, as she had not seen the end of evil; albeit the sick man only lingered for a few weeks longer, before he was carried to his nameless grave in Cranbrook Church.

CHAPTER III.

"AND TO THE VIEWLESS SHADES HER SPIRIT FLED."

It was a habit with the two little girls, when the weather was bad and they could not ramble far afield in the spacious park, to take their exercise anywhere they could about the old rambling house, chasing each other up and down the corridors, skipping and dancing in the great unused reception-rooms, penetrating into every nook and corner, fearless, inquisitive, full of life and fun; but the sport which they enjoyed most of all was a game of hide-and-seek in the offices, the wood-sheds, and breweries, and disused coach-houses, kennels, and stabling. This was their sovereign domain, a region in which no one had ever interfered with their rights. Here they could be as noisy and as boisterous as they pleased, could give full indulgence to the riotous spirits of childhood. Mrs. Bridget was a kind nurse, but she

was by no means a watchful one. The doctor had told her that it was good for children to run wild, most especially for little Rena, whose brain was in advance of her years; and Bridget acted upon this advice in a very liberal spirit. She was an arrant gossip, and would spend hours in the kitchen, with her arms folded in her apron, talking to the cook and housemaids, while her charges amused themselves as they listed in the house, or in the offices outside the house.

"They can't come to any harm," said Bridget. "They are not like mischievous boys, who would go climbing out of windows and getting into dangerous places. My little dears only run about and play prettily together."

A shout, a rush of little feet, and a peal of childish laughter in the passage outside the great stone kitchen would emphasise Bridget's remark.

No, they had never come to any harm in those rambling desolate stables, brewhouses, and woodhouses, till about three days after Roderick Layburne's departure, when, in a grand game of hide-and-seek, which had lasted over an hour, Linda,

flushed and breathless with exercise and excitement, crept into the room which the sick man had occupied, and seated herself to rest upon the bed he had lain upon for fourteen weary days and fourteen restless nights.

She wondered a little at the tokens of recent occupation, such as she had never seen in any of these rooms before: ashes in the grate, a pipkin on one hob and a saucepan on the other, empty cups and jugs on a little table, and blankets on the bed where she was sitting.

She was too young to reason upon these evidences.

"Some one lives here," she told herself simply, but had no fear of the unknown personage. She waited so long for Rena to discover her hiding-place that she fell asleep at last, nestling down among those fever-tainted blankets. Rena found her there slumbering soundly, half an hour later, after having examined every hole and corner in her search, and crying with vexation at the difficulty of the quest.

It was not till ten days later that the evil result began to show itself. First Linda began to droop,

and then Rena, each falling ill with exactly the same symptoms. The old doctor shook his head solemnly, "Scarlet fever, with the rash suppressed," he pronounced like an oracle; and immediately began to starve and to physic them, almost as if he were voluntarily working in unison with that deadly fever which was burning up their young blood.

The Squire was in an agony when he heard of his daughter's danger. He had seemed a careless and an indifferent father, and had seen very little of his child in those infantile years. He had no sympathy with childhood, could not understand its ways and ideas, knew not what to say to his little daughter or how to amuse her. It had been sufficient for him to know that she was near at hand, and that she was thriving.

But at the idea of peril he was like a madman. Barbara Layburne was surprised at the violence of his feelings. She looked at him with a curious air of suppressed cynicism.

"I had no idea you were so wrapped up in that baby," she said.

"Then you might have known as much. What else have I in this world to care for—to toil for—"

"Pray be reasonable, Mr. Bosworth. We all know that you love money for its own sake—not for those who are to come after you."

"Yes, but to know that when I am gone my wealth must be scattered to the four winds—that no grandchildren of mine will inherit all that I have slaved for; that no grandson of mine will assume my name, and hand it down to his son with the wealth I have amassed, and which he should increase! Money fructifies of itself when there is but common prudence in the possessor. It is to my daughter's children I look for the reward of all my toils, the perpetuation of my name: and if she dies, the cord snaps, and all is over. I shall have to leave my money to a hospital or an almshouse. Horrid thought!"

"Horrid thought, indeed, for Squire Bosworth to contemplate his fortune as a means of blessing to the helpless!"

"You have a scathing tongue, Mrs. Barbara, and I sometimes think you have a malignant mind to set

the tongue wagging. I never met but one woman who was true and pure and noble to the heart's core, and that was the sweet saint whom Fate snatched away from me."

"And who never loved you," sneered Barbara. "That is to the credit of her wisdom."

"Ay; but she was better to me than the women who have pretended to love me—women whose love has been a curse. Do not speak of her. Your lips befoul her."

And then he went to the chamber where the children were lying in their two little beds side by side. It had been impossible to part them; they would have fretted themselves to death in severance. And as they were both sick of the same fever, there seemed no need for keeping them in separate rooms.

The windows were curtained, the room kept in semi-darkness, as was the fashion in those days. Invalids were supposed to thrive best in the gloom. Every breath of air was excluded, and a large fire burned merrily in the grate, where divers messes and potions were stewing. An odour of drugs pervaded the room. The Squire could hardly draw his

breath in that stifling atmosphere. But fresh air in a fever! Heaven forbid!

Bosworth sat by his child's bedside for a few minutes, holding the little burning hand in his, suffering an agony of helplessness and apprehension. What could his hoards do for her? Crœsus himself could not have bought an hour's respite for the little life that seemed ebbing away. How thick and laboured was her breathing!

"Surely she would do better with more air," said her father; but the nurses assured him that a puff of cold wind would be deadly. They dared not open a window. The nurses were Bridget and a woman from the village, who had a reputation for skill in all diseases. But the chief nurse was Barbara Layburne, who had taken up her abode in a room adjoining the sick-chamber, and who scarcely ceased from her watching by day or night.

She had heard the history of that fatal game at hide-and-seek, and how Rena had discovered Linda fast asleep on a bed in one of the rooms in the deserted stable. She knew too well what the fever meant, with its suppressed eruption—knew that

she was to blame for the evil, by her carelessness after the sick man's departure. She had kept so close in her own den, had taken so little notice of the children, that she had never known of their occasional inroads upon the disused stables. Had she known more of children's ways, she would have known that it is just in such deserted regions that they love to play. Imagination is free amidst emptiness and solitude ; and a child's fancy will convert a barn or a wood-shed into an enchanted palace.

"I will post to London and get the cleverest doctor in the town," exclaimed Bosworth.

It was the one only thing his money could do for that perishing child. He bent bown and kissed the dry lips, inhaling the putrid breath, almost wishing that it might poison him if *she* were not to recover, and that they two might be laid in the same grave with the young mother. And then he left the sick-room, ordered a horse for himself, and another for his groom. The groom was to gallop on ahead to the market-town, and order a post-chaise to be in readiness for his master. The Squire was in London soon afte[r]

nightfall, and at his club, inquiring for the doctor who was cleverest in fever cases. He was told of Dr. Denbigh in Covent Garden, a youngish man, but a great authority on fevers; and to Covent Garden he went between eleven o'clock and midnight.

Dr. Denbigh was a student, and given to working late. He answered the door himself, in dressing-gown and slippers, and on the Squire's urgent entreaty consented to start at once, or as soon as post-horses could be got ready. He could return in the morning early enough to see his gratis patients, who came to him in flocks. He was known in all the vilest slums and alleys of London, and was the beloved of the London poor.

It was a three hours' journey, with good horses and short stages, to Fairmile Court; and it was the dead of the night when Bosworth and the physician stole softly into the children's sick-chamber, where nurse Bridget was dozing in her armchair, while Mrs. Layburne sat bolt upright beside Rena's bed, watching the child's troubled slumbers.

"What an atmosphere!" cried Dr. Denbigh.

"Draw back those curtains, madam, if you please; open yonder window."

"The doctor forbade us to open door or window."

"That is a fine old-fashioned style of treatment, madam, which has helped to people our churchyards. You needn't be afraid of the night air. It is a fine dry night, and as wholesome as the day. Pray let those poor children have some fresh air."

Barbara Layburne obeyed, deeming herself the unwilling accessory to a murder. Bridget had rubbed her eyes, and was staring wonderingly at the strange doctor. The village nurse was snoring rhythmically in an adjoining room.

Dr. Denbigh seated himself between the two little beds, and examined the sufferers, each in turn, with ineffable gentleness, with thoughtful patient care.

"The symptoms are exactly the same," he said gravely, "but they are severest here."

It was on Rena that his hand rested. The Squire groaned aloud.

"Shall I lose her?" he asked. "She is my all."

"The child is very ill. What does your doctor call the malady?"

"Scarlet fever."

"Scarlet fever! Why, there is no rash!"

"He tells me that in some cases the rash does not appear—in some of the worst cases."

"This is no scarlet fever, sir. It is typhus—commonly called gaol fever—distinctly marked. It is a low form of putrid fever. Your child and her companion must have been visiting some of the poor folks' cottages, where the disease is often found."

"They have not been beyond the park-gates. You have not taken them among the cottagers, have you, Bridget? You have not disobeyed my strict orders?"

"Never, sir. The little dears will tell you themselves, when they have got their senses back, that I never took them nowheres."

"Have you had any fever case lately among your servants, indoors or out?"

"Mrs. Layburne, yonder, can answer that question better than I."

"No, there has been no such illness," said Barbara.

"Strange," said the doctor; "the fever is gaol fever, and no other."

He wrote a prescription, ordered an entire change of treatment: wine, brandy, the strongest soup that could be made—a chicken boiled down to a breakfast-cupful of broth—and, above all, cleanliness and fresh air. He gave many directions for the comfort of the children, and left within the hour of his arrival, promising to come again in three days, when he would confer with the local doctor. He would write fully to that gentleman next morning, to explain his change of treatment.

"I have no doubt I shall induce him to concur with me," he said.

Mr. Bosworth followed him to the chaise.

"Tell me the truth, for God's sake," he said. "Is there any hope for my child?"

The physician shook his head with a sorrowful air.

"She is very ill; they are both dangerously ill," he answered. "I would not trifle with you for worlds. You are a man, and can meet misfortune with courage and firmness. I doubt if either of

those children will recover; but I will do my utmost to save both. If the nurses follow out my instructions exactly, there may be a change for the better within forty-eight hours; if not, the case is hopeless. I would have you prepared for the worst."

They clasped hands and parted. It was some hours before Roland Bosworth went back to the house. He roamed about the park in the cold starry night, brooding over past and future. For the last fifteen years he had given himself up to the pursuit of money for its own sake. He had haunted the City and the Exchange; he had speculated successfully in many a hazardous enterprise at home and abroad. At a period when speculation was but a science in the bud, he had shown himself far in advance of his class. He had added thousand to thousand, gloating over every increase of his capital, every lucky transaction on 'Change; and now it dawned upon him all at once that in the very pursuit of wealth he had lost the faculty for enjoying it; that he had fallen unawares into the miser's sordid habits—had lost all gusto for pleasure, all delight

in life. Nothing remained to him but the abstract idea of wealth, and the knowledge that he could leave it behind him as a monument of his own individual greatness when he should be dust. He could only thus leave it—only secure his grip upon the future—through that little child who lay dying yonder within those dimly-lighted windows. Again and again during those melancholy hours he had drawn near the house, had stood for a little while below those lighted windows, looking up at the open lattice, and listening for some sound from within. But there had been nothing—a solemn stillness, as it were the silence of death.

And now, when the first sign of daybreak showed cold and pale above the eastern side of the park, a long gray streak against which the topmost boughs of oak and elm showed inky black, Mr. Bosworth went back to the house from a still wider circuit, and looked up again at the open window. Suddenly as he stood there a long shrill shriek rose on the silent air like a wild appeal to heaven; and then another and another shriek; and then a burst of passionate sobbing.

"It means death," said the Squire, nerving himself like a stoic. "The end has come quickly."

It was Bridget who had screamed. She was sitting on the floor with one of the children on her lap, dead. A handkerchief had been hastily flung over the dead face, upon which Bridget's tears were streaming. Barbara Layburne sat beside the other bed, Rena's bed, soothing the little sufferer.

The Squire stood on the threshold.

"Is my child still alive?" he asked, hardly daring to enter that room of horror.

"Yes. She is a shade better, I think," answered Barbara; "the cold lotions have relieved her head. Poor little Linda changed for the worse soon after the doctor left. We have had a terrible night with her. Her struggling and restlessness at the last were awful. We could not hold her in her bed, and she died in Bridget's arms ten minutes ago."

"O my darling, my darling, my precious pet!" wailed the nurse, with her face bent over that marble face under the handkerchief.

Roland Bosworth gave a long sigh, significant of intense relief; yet this was but a reprieve after all,

perhaps. One blossom had withered and fallen from the stem: the other would follow.

"Dr. Denbigh told me that my child was in more imminent danger than the other," he said.

"Ay, but fevers are so capricious," answered Barbara, calm and unshaken in this hour of sorrow, "and with children no one can be sure of anything. Yesterday Rena seemed the worst, but after Dr. Denbigh left Linda began to sink rapidly. We gave her brandy and beaten eggs at half-hour intervals; we cut off her hair and applied the cooling lotion to her head; it was not for want of care that she died."

"What will Rena do without her?" exclaimed the Squire, thinking more of the living than the dead. Linda had never been more to him than a chattel—something bought for his daughter's pleasure.

He went over to the bed, and sat beside it in the faint gray morning light. The candles had guttered and burnt low in the sockets of the massive old silver candlesticks. The morning looked in at the open casement, pale and cold.

They had cropped the child's golden hair close to her head. Pinched with illness and thus shorn of its luxuriant curls, the whole character of the face seemed altered.

"Why did you cut off her hair?" asked the Squire.

"It was by the doctor's orders. Did not you hear him tell us?"

"Ay, to be sure. My wits were wool-gathering."

He bent down and kissed the fevered lips as he had done before. The child was lying in a kind of stupor, neither sleep nor waking.

"Try to save her for me," said Bosworth, as he rose and left the room.

The village nurse was still asleep in the next room; she had watched two nights running, and was indemnifying herself for those two vigils. Bridget and Barbara laid out their dead in another room before they awakened the nurse. The doctor came at nine o'clock, heard what Dr. Denbigh had said, and shrugged his shoulders unbelievingly. He was disposed to ascribe Linda's death to that most reckless opening of a window between midnight and

morning. He even affected to disapprove of those shorn tresses which lay in a golden heap upon the dressing-table, Linda's and Rena's so near in tint that it was not easy to distinguish one from the other.

"We shall see the effect of this new-fangled treatment," he said, looking at the prescription. "If Squire Bosworth were a man of society, he would not have committed such a breach of manners as to post off to town and bring down a strange doctor without conferring with me."

"He wanted to save his child," said Barbara.

"That is what we all want, madam; but it might just as well be done in accordance with professional etiquette," replied the doctor.

Although huffed by the Squire's conduct, he yet deigned to follow out Dr. Denbigh's treatment: and by a strict adherence to those instructions Rena began visibly to improve, and when the physician come to Fairmile on the third day he was able to give a favourable verdict.

"Your daughter is decidedly better," he said. "I am very sorry we lost her little companion. She

was a pretty child—more robust than this one, and, as I thought, in less danger; but these little lives hang by the flimsiest thread."

The child who had been called Belinda was buried in the same churchyard where her unknown father lay in his pauper's grave; but the Squire showed himself unwontedly liberal, insomuch that he ordered a headstone to mark the child's resting-place—a stone upon which this inscription was cut at his own particular order:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF

BELINDA,

A CHILD OF FIVE YEARS,

WHO WAS FOR THREE YEARS THE BELOVED COMPANION OF

IRENE BOSWORTH.

Obit October 29, 1712.

Irene recovered, but her recovery was of the slowest. The loss of her playfellow retarded her convalescence. She sorrowed with a deeper sorrow than children are wont to feel at the loss of those they love. Fever and delirium hung upon her for nearly a month after her child-friend had been carried to Flamestead churchyard. Dr. Denbigh declared the case one of the most interesting and

the most difficult that had come within his experience. There was a period in the history of the case when he began to fear for the little patient's mind; and even after convalescence her memory was found to be weakened, and there were moments of actual hallucination.

"She owes her life, under Providence, to Mrs. Bridget's excellent nursing," said Dr. Denbigh—commendation which brought sudden tears to Bridget's eyes. This praise was thoroughly deserved, for the nurse had devoted herself to her duties with untiring devotion, and had scarcely enjoyed a night's sleep during the four weary weeks of uncertainty that followed Linda's funeral. She grieved for the child that was gone with a deeper sorrow than might have been anticipated, seeing that her own particular charge, the child she had nursed from its birth, had been given back to her as if from the very jaws of death. She did her duty to the survivor with unstinted devotion; but it would have almost seemed that her heart was in the grave of that child which had been taken.

Squire Bosworth's conduct in many of the relations of life changed in a marked degree after this

period of peril, in which his child's life, and as it were his own fate, had trembled in the balance. He became a more affectionate father, a better landlord, and a kinder master. He still appeared on 'Change every week, still speculated and laboured for the increase of his vast fortune, still hoarded and calculated and hung fondly over his piles of debentures and securities, mortgages and New River shares. The very bent and habit of his mind was too deeply engrained in him to be changed at forty years of age; but he became less miserly in many things, and he placed his establishment upon a more liberal footing, although retaining Mrs. Layburne at the head of affairs. For his daughter he spared nothing. He gave her toys, lap-dogs, and a pony, and never allowed a day to pass while he was at Fairmile without spending some portion of it in the little girl's society. For the rest he was as much a recluse as ever, shunning all his neighbours, and never sharing in any of those field-sports which are, and ever have been, the chief bond of union between country gentlemen.

CHAPTER IV.

"HOW BRIGHT SHE WAS, HOW LOVELY DID SHE SHOW!"

To be a fashionable beauty, with a reputation for intelligence—nay, even for that much rarer quality, wit; to have been born in the purple; to have been just enough talked about to be interesting as a woman with a history; to have a fine house in Soho Square, and a mediæval abbey in Hampshire; to ride, dance, sing, play, and speak French and Italian better than any other woman in society; to have the finest diamonds in London; to be followed, flattered, serenaded, lampooned, written about and talked about, and to be on the sunward side of thirty: surely to be and to have all these good things should fill the cup of contentment for any of Eve's daughters.

Lady Judith Topsparkle had all these blessings, and flashed gaiety and brightness upon the world in

which her lot was cast; and yet there were those among her intimates—those who sipped their chocolate with her of a morning, before her head was powdered or her patches put on—who declared that she was not altogether happy.

The diamonds, the spacious house in Soho Square, with its Turkey carpets and Boule furniture, its plenitude of massive plate and Italian pictures, its air of regal luxury and splendour; the abbey near Ringwood, with its tapestries, pictures, curios, and secret passages, were burdened with a certain condition which for Lady Judith reduced their value to a minimum.

All these good things came to her through her husband. Of her own right she was only the genteelest pauper at the Court end of London. Her blood was of the bluest. She was a younger daughter of one of the oldest earls; but Job himself, after Satan had done his worst, was not poorer than Lord Bramber. Lady Judith had brought Mr. Topsparkle nothing but her beauty, her quality, and her pride. Love she never pretended to bring him, nor liking, nor even respect. His father had made his

fortune in trade; and the idea of a tradesman's son was almost as repulsive to Lady Judith as that of a blackamoor. She married him because her father, and society in general, urged her to marry him, and, in her own phraseology, "the matter was not worth fighting about." She had broken just a year before with the only man she had ever loved, had renounced him in a fit of pique on account of some scandal about a French dancing-girl; and from that hour she had assumed an air of recklessness; she had danced, flirted, talked, and carried on in a manner that delighted the multitude, and shocked the prudes. Bath and Tunbridge Wells had rung with her sayings and doings; and finally she surrendered herself, not altogether unwillingly, to the highest bidder.

She was burdened with debt, and hardly knew what it was to have a crown-piece of ready money. At cards she had to borrow first of one admirer and then of another. She had been able to get plenty of credit for gowns and trinketry from a harpy class of tradespeople, India houses in the City and Court milliners at the West End, who speculated in Lady

Judith's beauty as they might have done in some hazardous but hopeful stock; counting it almost a certainty that she would make a splendid match and reward them bounteously for their patience.

Mr. Topsparkle saw her at Bath in the zenith of her charms. He met her at a masquerade at Harrison's Rooms, followed and intrigued her all the evening, and at last, alone in an alcove with her after supper, induced her to take off her mask. Her beauty dazzled those experienced eyes of his, and he fell madly in love with her at first sight of that radiant loveliness—starriest eyes of violet hue, a dainty little Greek nose, a complexion of lilies and blush-roses, and the most perfect mouth and teeth in Christendom. No one had ever seen anything more beautiful than the tender curves of those classic lips, or more delicate than their faint carmine tinge. In an epoch when almost every woman of fashion plastered herself with vermilion and ceruse, Lord Bramber's daughter could afford to exhibit the complexion Nature had given her, and might defy paint to match it. Lady Judith laughed at her conquest when she was told about it by half

a dozen different admirers at the Rooms next morning.

"What, that Topsparkle man!" she exclaimed —"the travelled cit who has been exploring all sorts of savage places in Spain and Italy, and writing would-be witty letters about his travels! They say he is richer than any nabob in Hindostan. Yes, I plagued him vastly, I believe, before I consented to unmask; and then he pretended to be dumfounded at my charms, forsooth! dazzled by this sun, into which you gentlemen look without flinching, like young eagles."

"My dear Lady Judith, the man is captivated—your slave for ever. You had better put a ring in his nose and lead him about with you, instead of that little black boy for whom you sighed the other day, and that his lordship denied you. He is quite the richest man in London, and he is on the point of buying Lord Ringwood's place in Hampshire—a genuine mediæval abbey, with half a mile of cloisters, and a fishpond in the kitchen."

"I care neither for cloisters nor kitchen."

"Ay, but you have a weakness for diamonds,"

urged Mr. Mordaunt, an old admirer, who was very much *au courant* as to the fair Judith's history and habits, had lent her money when she was losing at basset, and had diplomatised with her creditors for her. "Witness that cross the Jew sold you t'other day."

Lady Judith reddened angrily. The same Jew dealer who sold her the jewel had insisted on having it back from her when he discovered her inability to pay for it, threatening to prosecute her for obtaining goods under false pretences.

"Mr. Topsparkle's diamonds—they belonged to his mother—are historical. His maternal grandfather was an Amsterdam Jew, and the greatest diamond merchant of his time. He had mills where the gems were ground as corn is ground in our country, and seem to have been as plentiful as corn. Egad, Lady Judith, how you would blaze in the Topsparkle diamonds!"

"Mr. Topsparkle must be sixty years of age!" exclaimed the lady, with sovereign contempt.

"I believe he is nearer seventy; but nobody supposes you would marry him for his youth or his

personal attractions. Yet he is by no means a bad-looking man, and he has had plenty of adventures in his day, I can assure your ladyship. *Il a vécu*, as our neighbours say. Topsparkle is no simpleton. When he set out upon the grand tour nearly forty years ago, he carried with him about as scandalous a reputation as a gentleman of fashion could enjoy. He had been cut by all the straitlaced people; and it is only the fact of his incalculable wealth which has opened the doors of decent houses for him since his return."

"I thank you for the compliment implied in your recommendation of him to me as a husband," said Lady Judith, drawing herself up with that Juno-like air which made her seem half a head taller, and which accentuated every curve of her superb bust. "He is apparently a gentleman whom it would be a disgrace to know."

"O, your ladyship must be aware that a reformed rake makes the best husband. And since Topsparkle went on the Continent he has acquired a new reputation as a wit and a man of letters. He wrote an Assyrian story in the Italian language, about

which the town raved a few years ago—a sort of demon story, ever so much cleverer than Voltaire's fanciful novels. Everybody was reading or pretending to read it."

"O, was that his?" exclaimed Judith, who read everything. "It was mighty clever. I begin to think better of your Topsparkle personage."

Five minutes afterwards, strolling languidly amidst the crowd, with a plain cousin at her elbow for foil and duenna, Lady Judith met Mr. Topsparkle walking with no less a person than her father.

Lord Bramber enjoyed the privilege of an antique hereditary gout, and came to Bath every season for the waters. He was a man of imposing figure, at once tall and bulky, but he carried his vast proportions with dignity and ease. He was said to have been the handsomest man of his day, and had been admired even by an age which could boast of John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, and the irresistible Henry St. John. Basking in that broad sunshine of popularity which is the portion of a man of high birth, graceful manners, and good looks, Lord Bramber had squandered a handsome fortune right royally,

and now, at five-and-fifty, was as near insolvency as a gentleman dare be. His house at Bath was a kind of haven to which he brought his family when London creditors began to be implacable. He had even thoughts of emigrating to Holland or Belgium, or to some old Roman town in the sunny south of France, where he might live upon his wife's pin-money, which happily was protected by stringent settlements and uncorruptable trustees.

He had married two out of three daughters well, but not brilliantly. Judith was the youngest of the three, and she was the flower of the flock. She had been foolish, very foolish, about Lord Lavendale, and a faint cloud of scandal had hung over her name ever since her affair with that too notorious rake. They had ridden together with foxhounds and harriers in the level fields round Hampton Court, had sat ever side by side in the royal barge, had been partners at basset, companions on all possible occasions; and the town had not been too indulgent about the lady's preference for such an unblushing reprobate. Admirers she had by the score; but since the Lavendale entanglement there

had been no serious advances from any suitor of mark.

But now Mr. Topsparkle, one of the wealthiest commoners in Great Britain, was obviously smitten with Lady Judith's perfections, and had a keen air which seemed to mean business, Lord Bramber thought. He had obtained an introduction to the Earl within the last half-hour, and had not concealed his admiration for the Earl's daughter. He had entreated the honour of a formal introduction to the exquisite creature with whom he had conversed on sportive terms last night at the Assembly Rooms.

Lady Judith acknowledged the introduction with the air of a queen, to whom courtiers and compliments were as the gadflies of summer. She fanned herself listlessly, and stared about her while Mr. Topsparkle was talking.

"I vow, there is Mrs. Margetson!" she exclaimed, recognising an acquaintance across the crowd; "I have not seen her for a century. Heavens, how old and yellow she is looking!—yellower even than you, Mattie;" this last by way of aside to her plain cousin.

"I hope you bear me no malice for my pertinacity last night, Lady Judith," murmured Topsparkle insinuatingly.

"Malice, my good sir! I protest, I never bear malice. To be malicious one's feelings must be engaged, and you would hardly expect mine to be concerned in the mystifications of a dancing-room."

She looked over his head as she talked to him, still on the watch for familiar faces among the crowd, smiling at one, bowing to another, kissing her hand to a third. Mr. Topsparkle was savage at not being able to engage her attention. At Venice, whence he had come lately, all the women had courted him, hanging upon his words, adoring him as the keenest wit of his day.

He was an attenuated and rather effeminate person, exquisitely dressed and powdered, and not without a suspicion of rouge upon his hollow cheeks, or of Vandyke brown upon his delicately pencilled eyebrows. He, like Lord Bramber, presented the wreck of manly beauty; but whereas Bramber suggested a three-master of goodly bulk and tonnage, battered, but still weather-proof and seaworthy,

Topsparkle had the air of a delicate pinnace which time and tempest had worn to a mere phantasmal barque, that the first storm would scatter into ruin.

He had hardly the air of a gentleman, Judith thought, considering him keenly all the while she seemed to ignore his existence. He was too fine, too highly trained for the genuine article: he lacked that easy inborn grace of the man in whom good manners are hereditary. There was nothing of the cit about him: but there was the exaggerated elegance, the exotic grace of a man who has too studiously cultivated the art of being a fine gentleman; who has learnt his manners in dubious circles, from *petites maîtresses* and *prime donne*, rather than from statesmen and princes.

On this and on many a subsequent meeting, Lady Judith was just uncivil enough to fan the flame of Vyvyan Topsparkle's passion. He had begun in a somewhat philandering spirit, not quite determined whether Lord Bramber's daughter was worthy of him; but her *hauteur* made him her slave. Had she been civil he would have given more account to those old stories about Lavendale, and would have

been inclined to draw back before finally committin himself. But a woman who could afford to be rude to the best match in England must needs be above all suspicion. Had her reputation been seriously damaged she would have caught at the chance of rehabilitating herself by a rich marriage. Had she been civil to him Mr. Topsparkle would have haggled and bargained about settlements; but his ever-present fear of losing her made him accede to Lord Bramber's exactions with a more than princely generosity, since but few princes could afford to be so liberal. He had set his heart upon having this woman for his wife: first, because she was the handsomest and most fashionable woman in London; and secondly, because, so far as burnt-out embers can glow with new fire, Mr. Topsparkle's battered old heart was aflame with a very serious passion for this new deity.

So there was a grand wedding from the Earl's house in Leicester Fields; not a crowded assembly, for only the very *élite* of the modish world were invited. The Prince and Princess of Wales honoured the company with their royal presence, and there

were the great Sir Robert, the classic Pulteney, the all-accomplished Carteret, John Hervey and his newly-wedded wife—in a word, all that was brightest and best at that junior and more popular Court of Leicester House. Mr. Topsparkle felt that he had cancelled any old half-forgotten scandals as to his past life, and established himself in the highest social sphere by this alliance. As Vyvyan Topsparkle, the half-foreign eccentric, he was a man to be stared at and talked about; but as the husband of Lord Bramber's daughter he had a footing—by right of alliance—in some of the noblest houses in England. His name and reputation were hooked on to old family trees; and those great people whose kinswoman he had married could not afford to have him maligned or slighted. In a word, Mr. Topsparkle felt that he had good value for his magnificent settlements.

Was Lady Judith Topsparkle happy, with all her blessings? She was gay; and with the polite world gaiety ranks as happiness, and commands the envy of the crowd. Nobody envies the quiet matron whose domestic life flows onward with the placidity

of a sluggish stream. It is the butterfly queen of the hour whom people admire and envy. Lady Judith, blazing in diamonds at a Court ball, beautiful, daring, insolent, had half the town for her slaves and courtiers. Even women flattered and fawned upon her, delighted to be acknowledged as her acquaintance, proud to be invited to her parties, or to dance attendance upon her in public assemblies.

She had been married three years, and her behaviour as a wife had been exemplary. Scandal had never breathed upon her name. The lampooners and caricaturists, a very coarse-minded crew under George I., had not yet bespattered her with their filth. They could only exaggerate her frivolities, caricature the cut of a train, the magnitude of a hoop, or the shape of her last new hat with its towering ostrich feathers, which obscured the view of the stage from the people who sat behind her in the side-boxes. They wrote about her appearances in the Park or at the Opera, about her parties and her high play, her love of horse-racing, and of the royal admirers of her charms; they wrote about her "Day," and the belles and beaux who thronged

to her drawing-rooms to ogle and chatter scandal or politics, with the ever-increasing laxity of manners which had set in after the death of good Queen Anne; but not the boldest pamphleteer in Grub Street had dared to assail her virtue.

"Wait till Lavendale comes back from the East," said Tom Philter, the party hack and newspaper scribbler, who pretended to have inherited the dignified humour of Addison and the easy graces of Prior, "and then you fellows will have plenty to write about 'Lady J——, the beautiful wife of a well-known City Crœsus, himself once notorious for—' We know the style. And you, Jemmy," to the caricaturist, "can draw such cartoons as thy soul loveth, 'How the lady and her lover were surprised by old Moneybags in the little back parlour of an India House in the City.' It will be a glorious time for you scandal-mongers when his lordship reappears; and I heard t'other day he had been seen at Vienna on his homeward route."

"Lady Judith is much too wise to have anything to say to such a scapegrace," said Jem Ludderly, the accomplished manufacturer of fashionable lam-

poons, who lived in May's Buildings, St. Martin's Lane, and saw the great world from the railings of the Park or the pit of the patent theatres.

"Love is never wise," sighed Philter.

"She may have been in love with him five years ago, when he was the handsomest man in town. I know they were monstrous friendly at Hampton Court, when she was maid of honour to the Princess during the Regency; indeed, I fancied at one time she was going the way of poor Sophia Howe, and that we should hear of her running off with Lavendale without benefit of clergy. But his lordship cut her, and she has had plenty of time to forget him," replied Ludderly.

"And she has not forgotten," said Philter, with a tragic air. He had tried the stage in his youth, and had failed ignominiously, yet still affected something of the dramatic air. "She is not the type of woman that forgets. Passion flames in those starry eyes of hers; unconquerable resolve gives form to those exquisite lips. Cleopatra must have had just such a carriage of the head, just such a queenly neck. All those charms imply an inborn imperi-

ousness of will. She is a woman to sacrifice a world for the man she loves; and let Lavendale but reappear and act remorse for the past, and she will fling herself into his arms, casting Topsparkle and his wealth to the winds."

"I am told that her settlements were so artfully framed that if she were to elope to-morrow she would still be a rich woman."

"O, you are told!" cried Philter disdainfully, strong in his social superiority, which was based upon an occasional condescending invitation to the house of some great man whom his supple quill had served; "and pray by whom are you told? By some scrivener's clerk, I suppose?"

"By the clerk of the lawyer who drew up the settlement," answered Mr. Ludderly, with a dignified air; "and I doubt if you, Mr. Philter, with all your fashionable acquaintance, could have much better authority."

"If the clerk lied not he was very good authority," said Philter. "But be sure of one thing, Jemmy: if Lady Judith has to lose all the world for love, she will lose it. I am a student of women's

faces, Jemmy, and I know what hers means. I was at a ball with those two not long before they quarrelled. It was at Lady Skirmisham's—her ladyship always sends me a card—"

"She would be very ungrateful if she didn't," interrupted Jemmy Ludderly, with a somewhat sulky air, "seeing that her husband is about the stupidest man in London; one of those hereditary dolts whom family influence foists upon the country, and that you are always writing him up as an oracle."

"There are worse men than Lord Skirmisham in the Cabinet, Jemmy. Well, as I was saying, it was my luck to be in Lady Judith's train of admirers at the Skirmisham ball, and late in the evening I came by chance into a little boudoir sort of room between the ballroom and the garden, where those two were alone together. It was a room hung with Chinese figured stuff, and there was but a transparent silk curtain where there should have been a door. She was clasped to his heart, Jemmy, sobbing upon his breast; he was swearing to be true and loyal to her, blaspheming in his passion, like the impious profligate he is, and invoking curses on his head if

he should ever deceive her. I stood behind the curtain for but a few seconds watching them, but there was a five-act tragedy in the passion of those moments. 'Be only faithful to me, dear love,' she said, looking up at him, with those violet eyes drowned in tears. 'There is no evil in this world or the next I would not dare for you; there is no good I would not sacrifice for you. Only be true; to a traitor I will grant nothing.'"

"Lucky dog," said Ludderly.

"Say rather swine, before whose cloven feet the richest pearl was cast in vain," sighed the sentimental Philter. "Then came talk of ways and means. His lordship was in low water financially, and had a diabolical reputation as a member of the famous Mohock Club; Lord Bramber would not hear of him as a match for his daughter. But there was always accommodating Parson Keith, and the little chapel in Curzon Street. 'If the worst comes, we will marry in spite of them,' he said; and then came more vows, and sighs, and a farewell kiss or two, and I stole away before they parted, lest they should surprise me. It was less than a

month from that night when everybody was talking of Lavendale's intrigue with the little French dancer Chichinette, and the house that he had furnished for her by the water at Battersea; and how they went there in a boat after the opera, with fiddles playing and torches flaring, and how his lordship entertained all his friends there, and had Chinese lanterns and fireworks after the fun was all over at Vauxhall. He made himself the talk of the town by his folly, as he had often done before; and I doubt he went near to break Lady Judith's heart."

"She would be a fool if she ever noticed him again after such treatment," said Ludderly.

"Ay, but a woman who loves blindly is a fool in all that concerns her love, be she never so wise in other matters; and to love like that once is to love for ever."

Lady Judith knew not how these scribblers discussed her, anatomising her old heart-wounds, speculating upon her future conduct. She knew not even that Lord Lavendale had returned from the East—where he had been following in the footsteps of an

eccentric kinswoman, and where, if report lied not, he had acquired new notoriety by breaking into a harem, and running a narrow risk of his life in the daring adventure. Lady Judith's first knowledge of his lordship's return was when she met him face to face in the Ring one fine morning, both of them on foot: she with her customary wake of fops and flatterers; he lounging arm in arm with his friend and travelling companion Herrick Durnford, who was said to be a little worse as to morals and principles than my lord himself.

In spite of that grand self-possession, that unflinching courage, and glorious audacity, which were in her race, a heritage whereof no spendthrift father could rob her, Lady Judith blanched at the sight of her old lover. A look of pain, of anger, almost of terror, came into the beautiful eyes, so large, so lustrous, so exquisitely shadowed by those ebon fringes when she had a mind to veil them.

But that look was momentary; she commanded herself in the next instant, saluted Lord Lavendale with the haughtiest inclination of her head, and swept onward, passing him as if he had been the lowest

thing that could have checked her progress or engaged her attention.

"She would have looked longer at a stray cur than she looked at me," said Lavendale to his companion, standing stock-still, planted, as it were, in his shame and mortification, as if that look of Lady Judith's had transfixed him.

"Why should she look at you?" asked the other. "You did your very uttermost towards breaking her heart, and if you did not succeed, 'tis that women are made of sterner stuff than men think. She owes you nothing but contempt."

Mr. Durnford was not one of those parasites who live and fatten upon a patron. He was a man of good birth and mean fortune, but he had too much pride to associate with Lavendale save on equal terms. He would have perished rather than descend to the position of led captain. He shared his friend's vices, but he never flattered them.

"She was always as proud as Lucifer, and I suppose she is prouder now she has the spending of Topsparkle's money. What a glorious creature she is, Herrick! Her beauty has ripened within the last

five years as a flower-garden ripens between May and July—developing day by day into a richer glow and flush of summer beauty. She is the most glorious creature on this earth, I swear. The Sultan's almond-eyed favourite, she they called the Star of the Bosphorus, is but a kitchen-wench to her."

"She might have been your wife had you behaved decently," said Durnford.

"Yes, she was to have been mine; and I lost her—for what, Herrick? For a whim, for a wager, for the triumph of ousting a rival. You don't suppose I ever cared for that little French devil! But to cheat Philip Wharton out of his latest conquest—to win five thousand from Camden of the Guards, who swore that I had no chance against Wharton—for the mere dash and swagger of the thing, Herrick—to get myself more talked about than any man in London, I carried off the little lady who had made herself the rage of the hour, and tried to think that I was over head and ears in love with her. In love with her—with a woman who ate garlic at every meal, and swore strange oaths in Gascon! 'Pécaïre!' she used to cry—'Pécaïre!' in her southern twang

—and I was ruining my fortune and my reputation for such a creature!"

"You had your whim," sneered Durnford. "You won Camden's five thousand."

"Every penny of which Chichinette devoured, with another five thousand to boot."

"Naturally. But you had your fancy, and you got yourself more lampooned and caricatured than any man in England, except the king. You came next to his Majesty in the supremacy of ridicule. And you lost Lady Judith Walberton."

"If she had cared for me she would have forgiven that passing scandal. A man must sow his wild oats."

"You were supposed to have sowed yours before you fell in love with Lady Judith. I have always told you, Lavendale, that I honour that lady for he renunciation of you. You will not make me budge from that. If she had loved you less she might have more easily forgiven you."

"Well, I can whistle her down the wind to prey at fortune. She has been wise after her generation, has married a rich old rake instead of a poor young

one. A reformed rake, 'tis said, makes the best husband, and that's why the women are ever so ready to pardon sinners. I would have been good to her had she but trusted me, Herrick, after that escapade. There should not have been a happier wife in England. But 'tis past, 'tis done with, lad. Thank Heaven, there are passions worth living for besides love."

"The passion of the gamester, for instance—to sit till three and four o'clock every morning at loo or faro!" suggested Herrick Durnford, with that easy, indifferent air of his, half-scornful, half-jocose, with which he made light of follies that he shared.

"Ah, but there are keener pleasures than loo and faro," said Lavendale, with an earnest look; "there are higher stakes to play for than paltry hundreds and thousands, nobler prizes to be won—gains that would set a man on a level with the gods."

"Dreams, Lavendale, idle dreams, visions, will-o'-the-wisps that have lured wiser men than you to the edge of the grave—only to leave him face to face with grim death, and he, poor fool! after a long life

wasted over alembics, burned out over the fires of his crucible—ay, with the elixir vitæ within his grasp—falls as easy a prey to the King of Terrors at last as the most ignorant tiller of the fields."

"If they are dreams, they have seemed realities to the wisest men this earth ever saw—Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, Paracelsus. If they were believers—"

"*Were* they believers? Across the lapse of centuries how can we tell how much of this was verity and how much falsehood—where the searcher after truth left off and the impostor began? Pshaw, Jack! we live in too prosaic an age to be fooled by those old-world delusions. Is there a man or woman in this park who would not think Lord Lavendale qualified for Bedlam, if it were known that he travelled with an old Venetian necromancer in his train, and that he had a serious expectation of discovering first the transmutation of metals, and then the elixir of life?"

"That were a noble discovery for all the race of man; for it is an anomaly in Nature that a man's life should be so brief as it is—that his intellect

should take at least thirty years to ripen, and that he should be thought to die full of years if he lives on till eighty—to say nothing of those accidents and contingencies which cut him off in his prime. No, there is error somewhere, friend. Man is too grand a creature for so limited a career. He dies ever with his mission unfulfilled, his task uncompleted. There must be, somewhere amid the mysteries of Nature, the secret of prolonged existence. Paracelsus looked for it and failed; but the world is two hundred years older since his time, and Vincenti is as deep a student as Paracelsus. But it is not that sublime secret for which I pine. My life is too worthless for me to care much about extending it; but there are occult powers for which my soul longs with a passionate longing—extended powers of will and mind, Herrick. The power to enter regions where this body of mine cannot reach—to steal as an invisible spirit into the presence of her I love, breathe in her ear, thrill her every nerve, impel her with my sovereign will to think and feel and move as I will her, draw her to me as the magnet draws iron. She passed me just now with royal disdain;

but if I had that mystic power she could not despise me—she must obey, she must love—my spirit would dominate hers as the moon rules the tides."

"Dreams, Jack, idle dreams; pleasant enough in the dreaming, soap-bubbles floating in the sunlight, radiant with all the colours of the prism, and vanishing into thin air while we watch them. Better perhaps the alembic and the pentagon than the faro-table and the dice-box. As you are a man who must have some kind of excitement, who cannot live out of a fever, perhaps Vincenti is no worse a hobby than any other. The old man is harmless, and devoted to you."

"Does he like Lavendale Manor, Herrick? Is he contented with his new quarters?" asked his lordship. "I saw you had a letter from him this morning."

"He says the old rooms delight him, and that the house is full of the influence of your forefathers. You know his ideas about the influence of the dead —that those in whom mind has been superior to matter never cease to be—that for such death is but transition from the visible to the invisible. The

body may rot in the grave, but the mind, which in this life dominated the body, still walks the earth, and exercises a mystic power over the mind of the living."

"Would that my mother's spirit could revisit that old house and hold commune with her wretched son!" exclaimed Lavendale. "She was the only being who ever influenced me for good, and Fate snatched her from me before my character was formed. I might have been a better man had she lived. I would not have grieved her gentle nature by the parade of my vices."

"And you might have been a hypocrite as well as a rake, Jack."

"No, Herrick; if I had but been happy I need have been neither rake nor hypocrite. It is the sense of a void here that drives us into evil courses. Had there been some pure affection to sustain my youth, I should never have gone wrong. When I met Judith I was too far gone; the rot was in the ship, and she must needs go to pieces. There is a stage in evil at which even virtuous love cannot save the sinner."

"And 'fore Heaven I know no more potent cure,"

said Herrick. "There goes Mrs. Howard, looking just a little older and deafer than when we saw her last: they say the Prince neglects her shamefully, and is more devoted to his wife than ever. Yes, Lavendale, a true-hearted woman is your only redeeming angel below the skies. But I doubt if Lady Judith belongs to the angelic order. She is a creature of passions and impulses, like yourself—a woman who would sacrifice every duty to the promptings of an undisciplined heart. May Fate keep two such fires asunder!"

Lavendale's only answer was a sigh. He sauntered through the Ring, returning and occasionally giving salutations, with a listless indifferent air which implied that he cared very little whether he was remembered or not. His appearance came as a surprise upon most of his old acquaintance, who had heard nothing of his return; but all who looked at him in the clear light of this bright May morning were startled at the change which three years' travel had made in him. He had left London a young man, in the pride and flush of manly beauty, justly renowned as one of the handsomest men about town.

He came back aged by at least a decade, haggard, and melancholy-looking; handsome still, for his delicately chiselled and patrician cast of features did not depend for their beauty upon freshness of colour; his eyes, though sombre and sunken, were still the same superb gray orbs which had flashed and sparkled in his radiant youth. The man was the same man, but it was as if a withering blast had passed across his manhood, blighting, scathing, consuming it; like some hot wind from the desert, that scorches and destroys the vegetation across which its fiery breath passes.

Was it the fire without—the perils and adventures of travel in wild regions—or the volcano within—the wasting fires of his own mind—which had so changed, so worn him? asked the more philosophical among those observers who contemplated John Lord Lavendale in his new aspect. There was only a speculative answer to be had to that question.

"I see that Herrick Durnford has him in tow still," said the Dowager Lady Polwhele to her satellite, Mr. Asterley, a gentleman who had no ostensible means of subsistence except his knife and

fork at Polwhele House, a certain occult power of always winning at cards, and who was supposed to dress better than any young man in London.

"Yes, he has his Herrick still," drawled Asterley; "the Inseparables, we used to call them. Herrick is the man who prompts all Lavendale's jokes, composes conversation for him, and writes all his letters —in a word, Herrick is Lavendale's brains."

"He is Lavendale's bad angel," protested the Countess.

"Nay, there you wrong him. He is the skid on the wheel of folly, and Lavendale would go downhill ever so much faster without him. He has a sublime audacity in telling his patron disagreeable truths."

"O, your modern flatterer always affects Diogenes, and is all the falser inwardly for that outward show of brutal candour. I am very sorry for Lavendale. He ought to marry an heiress, like that poor Carberry girl who married the Duke of Bolton, and was so miserable with him. We must find him an heiress, Asterley; be sure you set about it instantly."

"They are not quite so plentiful as blackberries, Lady Polwhele."

"O, but they exist, they are to be found. One must be found for Lavendale. I mean to take Lavendale under my wing."

Asterley shrugged his shoulders, and said nothing. Lady Polwhele had always her train of young men, rich or poor, gentlemen or commoners, as the case might be, and it was the business of her life to recruit this regiment of hers. She was rich, and Polwhele House, Whitehall, was one of the most popular bachelors' hotels in London. A French *chef*, an Italian confectioner, music-rooms, dancing-rooms, and loo and faro nightly—with all the charm of pretty women to flirt with, and the supreme advantage of no bill to pay. All the best young men in London swore by Lady Polwhele, who had been a famous belle and had been young when William of Orange was king, who was said to have rivalled Lady Orkney in the monarch's favour, and who was now a remarkably well-preserved and skilfully painted dowager of fifty summers.

"Well, Jack, are you pleased to be back again

in the old Ring?" asked Durnford, as the two young men crossed the Bath Road.

"No, Herrick, I would rather be in the foulest hovel in Hungary. I loathe this mill-horse round they call polite society. These grinning masks which make believe to be living faces. These friendly becks and nods and hand-clasps behind which lurk envy, malice, and all uncharitableness. We'll order post-horses, and start for Lavendale directly after dinner."

CHAPTER V.

"I HAVE FORGOT WHAT LOVE AND LOVING MEANT."

BETWEEN 1710 and 1726 Fairmile Park had been growing year by year less like a gentleman's park and more like a forest. The wild tangle of underwood, the hollies and hawthorns, the wildernesses of beech and oak, the deep ferny glades, and patches of furze and heather took a richer beauty with every season, and throve and flourished under a *régime* of absolute neglect. And in this wilderness Irene roamed at large, unfettered and uncontrolled as the spirit of the woods, and seeming to tramp or villager who met her suddenly, amidst the glancing lights and tremulous shadows of interwoven boughs, almost as ethereal as some nameless being from another world. Never had peasant or tramp accosted her rudely in all those years in which she had roamed alone, growing from childhood to womanhood, ever

in the same woodland seclusion, and never knowing the shadow of weariness. Her childhood and girlhood had been passing solitary since the waif's death, but those slow monotonous years had been in no wise unhappy. Roland Bosworth had been an indulgent father, desiring nothing so much as his daughter's happiness. Had he seen her pine in her lonely life he would, at any sacrifice to himself, have changed his habits; but as he saw her joyous and happy, in perfect health and radiant beauty, he saw no reason to take her out of the almost monastic seclusion in which she had been reared into the perils and temptations of the outer world. For Mr. Bosworth's daughter, the heiress of wealth which had become somewhat notorious by the mere progress of years, there would be snares and traps, and it was well that she should be guarded closely. When the time came for her to marry it would be his business to find a fitting alliance; to mate wealth with wealth, and thus guard against the possibility of mercenary feeling on the part of the husband. Society in those days was thickly beset with heiress-hunters; and the heiress-hunter of a hundred and

fifty years ago was an adventurer only less audacious than the highwayman who stopped coaches on Hounslow Heath, or on the wild hills beyond the Devil's Punchbowl.

For a year or more after the nameless orphan's death Rena had pined for her little companion; but gradually the vividness of memory faded, the sweet sister face, smiling back her own smiles like an image reflected in a river, became a dream, and revisited her only in dreams; and then came the awakening of the young mind to external beauty, the deep, inborn love of Nature reviving in the expanding soul; the delight in flowers, and sun, and clouds, and trees, and streamlets, and the still, dark lakelet, upon whose placid surface the tracery of summer boughs made such delicate shadows. The love of mute companions intensified with the ripening years; the great Newfoundland dog with its massive head and grave affectionate eyes; the ponies, and rabbits, and poultry-yard with its ever-varying delights; the tame hare, the talking magpie: these were her companions and friends, and provided occupation from January to December.

Until her tenth year the Squire's daughter was allowed to riot in the delight of ignorance. She ran wild from morn till eve, learnt no more than Mrs. Bridget could teach her, whose scope in the actualities of education did not go far beyond the alphabet and words of one syllable, but whose imaginative powers were wide and memory particularly vivid. From this teacher Rena learnt all the most famous fairy tales of the world, and a good many old English and Scottish ballads. These furnished her fancy with themes for thought and dreaming, and stimulated a poetical feeling which seemed inborn, so early did it show itself.

When she was approaching her twelfth birthday the Squire, who had allowed himself until now to be deterred by Mrs. Layburne's black looks at the mention of a governess, suddenly lost patience.

"My only child is growing up as ignorant as a kitchen-wench through your folly," he said. "I must hire a governess for her before the month is out."

"So be it," answered Barbara, with a fretful shrug of her lean shoulders; "but if you wish to

keep your daughter clear of adventurers and fortune-hunters, you had best beware of governesses, music-masters, and all such cattle. They are mostly in league with some penniless schemer on the look-out for a fortune."

"My daughter is too young to be in danger yet awhile."

"Too young to be married, perhaps, but not too young to be perverted by sentimental tales about lovers; and a few years later the governess whispers that the romance may be made earnest, and some fine afternoon governess and pupil meet a young man in the park, who protests he has seen Miss at her window one day and has been pining for her ever since. Then come a post-chaise, pistols, and a helter-skelter drive to the purleius of the Fleet Prison, and the pretty young pair are fast bound in matrimonial fetters before the father can catch them."

"I'll warrant there shall be no folly of that kind," said Bosworth.

"How will you warrant it? Every adventurer in London knows that you made a hundred thousand the other day in the South Sea Bubble, and that you

had made a handsome fortune on 'Change long before that great *coup*, dabbling first in one stock, now in another; and they know that you have an only child, like Shylock's Jessica. Do you suppose there will be no Lorenzo to hunt after your daughter and your ducats? Perhaps among those penniless wights there may be some who have been ruined by the South Sea scheme, and who will bear no love to you who sold your stock when the madness was at its height, and when every hundred-pound share realised over a thousand to the speculator who was clever enough to profit by the craziness of the mob."

"Lorenzo shall have no chance with my daughter."

"Ay, so long as she is guarded from crafty go-betweens; but admit a governess and a fine Italian music-master, and look out for rope-ladders and post-chaises. Why cannot I teach Rena? I am a better musician than many of your Signors, and I can read and write English and French as well as any chit of a governess you can hire."

"No," answered Bosworth sternly, "*that* is out

of the question. I will not have my dead wife's daughter taught by you."

Barbara looked at him for a moment or two, white with fury; and then she burst into a mocking laugh.

"Your dead wife's daughter! O, that is her new name, is it? Your wife's daughter. It is well you should throw your wife's name in my face—the name I once had."

"Never by any legal right, though you might have borne that name in serious earnest, my brimstone beauty, had you kept a little tighter rein on that diabolical temper of yours. Pshaw! why should we quarrel about the past? It is a sealed book for both of us. Get a room ready against this day week, Mrs. Layburne. I shall write to my sister-in-law, Lady Tredgold, to find me a governess for my daughter."

There was a certain look in Roland Bosworth's countenance which Mrs. Layburne knew meant the irrevocable. She subsided into her position of obedient housekeeper, she who had once been sovereign ruler of this man's life. It was so long ago, that golden age of beauty and power, when Barbara

Layburne's singing and Barbara Layburne's face were the rage at the theatre in the Haymarket, where she had sung in English opera, and for one brief season had been almost as much admired and talked about as La Faustina or Cuzzoni were in later years. She looked back across the mist of years, and wondered if she were verily the same woman at whose feet lovers had been sighing when the century was young. The gulf betwixt youth and age, betwixt loveliness and gray hairs, is such a tremendous abyss, that it is not strange if a woman should half doubt her own identity, looking across that terrible ravine and seeing the vision of her past existence on the other side. No two women living could be more different than that woman of the past and this woman of the present.

Lady Tredgold was an energetic personage who lived at Bath for the greater part of the year, gambled moderately, and contrived to support a numerous family upon a small income, which her husband, a staunch Walpolian, had improved by his senatorial opportunities. She had seen very little of her sister's husband since his wife's death,

Mr. Bosworth having done his uttermost to keep his wife's relations at a distance. She felt flattered at his application, and lost no time in providing a governess for her niece, in the person of an elderly Frenchwoman, small, shrivelled, and slightly lame, who had taught her ladyship's four daughters, and prepared her three sons for Eton. The opportunity thus afforded provided a home for Mademoiselle Latour, and saved Lord Tredgold the pension which duty would have constrained him to provide for the superannuated governess.

Rena was at first inclined to resent the introduction of a stranger into her life, with authority to control her movements; but she found Mademoiselle so thoroughly lovable and sympathetic, that her young heart soon found room for a new affection. Lessons were made light and easy by the experienced teacher, much instruction was imparted by way of amusement, the pupil gaining knowledge unconsciously; nor was her liberty severely curtailed. She still roved at will in the woodland wilderness which was only in name a park, and in summertime her studies were for the most part performed

in the garden, where Mademoiselle had a favourite seat in the shadow of a clipped yew hedge, a massive wall of dense greenery ten feet high, and her rustic table on which writing and drawing were managed in despite of all the summer insects that buzz in the meridian sun. Mademoiselle was too lame to accompany her pupil in her wanderings, but it was a point of honour with Rena not to go beyond the park-fence, however temptingly those further wildernesses of pine and larch to the east, or the undulating common-land to the south, might beckon to a young explorer.

But Mademoiselle's chief hold upon her pupil, in the early days of their association, was derived from a new pleasure which those withered little hands of hers revealed to the Squire's daughter. At the governess's request Mr. Bosworth ordered a new harpsichord from the best maker in London, a harpsichord with all the last improvements, and as superior to that old instrument which Mrs. Layburne had appropriated and carried off to her own sitting-room, as Handel was superior to his sometime rival Bononcini.

Mademoiselle touched the harpsichord exquisitely, with a light airy style which harmonised perfectly with that old French music she mostly affected. But she did not confine herself exclusively to the Gallic masters: she had the airs from Rinaldo and all Handel's operas by heart, and enraptured Rena by her varied stores of melody. It was the child's introduction to a new world—the magical world of music. The little fingers were quick to learn those easy movements with which a good teacher begins the apprenticeship to that divine art: the quick young mind soon grasped the elements of musical theory. Rena learned to read music quicker than to read books, so eager was she to acquire power over that wonderful keyboard which held all the melodies that had ever been composed; and unwritten, unimagined melodies no less beautiful, could she but find them. She had a natural bent for music which should have been hereditary, so strongly did it reveal itself; yet neither Squire Bosworth nor the gentle Lady Harriet had ever been distinguished by a love of music, still less by any executive faculty.

For the rest, the little Frenchwoman's advent made but slight difference in the life at Fairmile Court, save to bring two or three more of the fine old rooms at the end of the house into occupation. Bridget was still her nursling's friend and companion, was in no wise relegated to the cold shade of mere domestic servitude. Mademoiselle Latour was too good a woman to seek to wean her pupil's affections from her old nurse. Mrs. Layburne lived her solitary life apart from the whole household, directing and governing all things, keeping the keys and ruling the servants, but holding companionship with no one. Squire Bosworth went and came between London and Fairmile as of old. When he was at home his daughter always dined with him, and spent an hour with him after dinner; and as the quiet years drifted past him, Roland Bosworth hardly noted how the child was developing into the woman, beautiful exceedingly in her bright girlish loveliness, full of impulse and vivacity, loving her life for its own sake, and desiring nothing beyond it. She had the placid contentment of a cloistered nun who

knows nothing of the world outside her convent-walls, nor sighs to know it.

The Squire had given her a guitar, upon which she used to accompany herself when she sang to him during his after-dinner musings over his pint of claret. He used to look at her with thoughtful, dreamy eyes as she sat in the afternoon sunlight, bending over her guitar with a graceful curve of the slender throat, her soft brown hair piled over a cushion on the top of the exquisitely shaped head, her gown of the simplest, her snowy neck shrouded with a soft lace handkerchief, her arms bare to the elbow, and the long delicate hands with slender flexible fingers, roseate-tipped and as beautiful as the hands of St. Cecilia in an old Italian picture.

It was perhaps more of his ducats than of his daughter Squire Bosworth thought as he watched her dreamily, soothed by her sweet singing. He could but think of that vast fortune which would be hers to deal with when he was clay—a too convertible form of wealth, in stocks and shares, which wanton extravagance might scatter as easily as a shower of rose-petals.

"I almost wish I had locked it up in land," he said to himself; "but land yields such a wretched return, and can always be mortgaged by a spendthrift. There is no power on earth that can project itself into the future, and secure the permanence of that which a man has toiled for after he is clay."

And now, in this year of grace 1726, Rena was eighteen, tall, slim, graceful, active as a young fawn, and without one impulse that rebelled against her father's authority or the monotonous placidity of her life. Mademoiselle Latour declared that in all her experience of the varieties of girlhood she had never had to deal with so sweet a nature, or so bright and teachable a mind. But this might be flattery, thought the Squire, since Mademoiselle knew that her pupil was a great heiress.

CHAPTER VI.

"YET WOULD I WISH TO LOVE, LIVE, DIE WITH THEE."

THREE miles and a quarter from Fairmile Court, as the crow flies, stands Lavendale Manor, one of the oldest seats in Surrey. It had been a Cistercian grange in the reign of Stephen, and had been an appendage of one of the most flourishing monastic institutions in England when the Reformation cut short the monks and all their works, good or evil, and confiscated the grange, with its fifteen hundred acres of woods and farmlands, in favour of one of the king's strongest supporters. From that nobleman's hands it had passed to another and still nobler house, and then by marriage to Sir John Porlock, a west-country baronet of good family, one of the most brilliant among the younger lights of Charles II.'s Court, a friend of Dorset and Rochester, whose son became a power among the Whig party in the House

of Commons at the beginning of William's reign, and was raised to the Peerage with the title of Baron Lavendale. The first Lord Lavendale died a year after his royal master, leaving an only son of eight years old to be brought up by a widowed mother. Unhappily, that best and purest of women died before her son attained manhood, and an impulsive light-hearted lad of fifteen was abandoned to the care of tutors, servants, and parasites in general; whereby a character which might easily have been shaped and guided for good was given over as a prey to the powers of evil.

Lavendale Manor, with its noble Italian gardens laid out by the famous French gardener, Le Nôtre, in the reign of Charles II., and its extensive park, had been but little less neglected for the last ten years than the neighbouring domain of Fairmile. During Lavendale's minority, stewards and servants had been unanimous in doing as little work as possible, and getting the most that could be got out of the estate; and from the time of his majority the owner of that estate had been doing his utmost to impoverish and even to

ruin it. The fountains and statues which Sir John Porlock had brought from Rome, the old dining-hall and carved stone porch which dated from the time of the martyred Becket, clipped yew-tree walls, pyramids, and obelisks of greenery, old things and new, had alike suffered neglect; mosses and lichens had crept over fountain and Greek gods, and ivy had forced its intrusive tendrils amidst the carven arches and clustered columns of the old Gothic porch.

The house itself had been decently kept, and Lavendale came back to his old home to find a certain appearance of preparedness and comfort in the fine old rooms, with their curious admixture of furniture, English, French, and Dutch, the latter preponderating with its somewhat clumsy bulk and variegated inlaying; great tulip-wood cabinets, which reminded Lavendale of the coat of many colours in that story of Joseph and his brethren which he remembered poring over again and again in that dim long ago when he was a little lad at his mother's knees, and had pious readings for Sundays. Too soon had come the time when Sunday reading

and Sunday as a day apart from other days had ceased to be for Lord Lavendale, and when he was in the first rank of fashionable infidels—the men who borrowed their opinions from Henry St. John, and welcomed the new light called Voltaire, a star just then showing pale and clear above the horizon.

It was late in the evening when Lavendale and Durnford arrived at the Manor House. They had ridden from Bloomsbury—a thirty-mile ride—and had baited their horses at Kingston. The servants were retiring for the night when the great bell rang under the stone porch, and all the household was on the alert in a minute or two, deferentially receiving a master whom they could have wished had found his way to the other side of the Stygian stream rather than to disturb the placidity of their after-supper repose. Footmen were sent flying to lay a table, and sleepy cook and kitchen-wench explored the larder. While supper was being prepared, Lord Lavendale went to the farther end of the house, to a spacious vaulted apartment that had been a refectory in the days of the Cistercians, but was now a library. Beyond it there was a still larger room

which had been a chapel, and, never converted to any secular purpose, had been left to bats, spiders, and emptiness.

Lavendale had seen lights in the windows of this room as he rode up to the house, and he guessed that Signor Vincenti, chemist, student, and discoverer, was at work there.

"Well, old mole!" he said gaily, as he opened the heavy oaken door, and stood looking at the Italian, who sat huddled up in a huge armchair beside a table loaded and scattered with volumes of all shapes and sizes, under the strong light of a curiously-shaped metal lamp, which made a central spot of vivid brightness in the great shadowy room. "You see we have not left you long to your solitary studies and your beloved seclusion. Durnford and I have come to badger you."

"'Twould be hard if you could not come to your own house, my lord," answered the old man quietly, looking up with luminous dark eyes which seemed all the more brilliant because of the snowy whiteness of the thick eyebrows and the long, drooping locks which fell over the forehead. "I will own that

solitude and silence have been very precious to me in this noble old mansion. Yes, silence is a priceless boon to the searcher. In the silence of the living we can feel the companionship of the dead."

Those last words had a subduing effect upon Lavendale. He laid aside hat and whip, came slowly across the room, and seated himself opposite the Italian.

"You have felt the influence of those who have gone before," he said; "of the dead who once lived and loved, and were glad and sorry, in this house."

"Yes, there never was yet an old house that was not eloquent with spirit voices. There is one gentle shade that has been near me often in these old rooms of yours—a tender, mournful soul, overcharged with sorrow."

"It is so easy for you to say these things," said Lavendale doubtingly. "You have heard me talk of my mother so often."

"You questioned and I answered," replied the old man. "If it please you to think me a charlatan, you are welcome to your opinion. I have neither gain nor honour to win from you or any man living.

I have my ends and aims, which neither you nor mortal man can aid. If I fail or if I succeed, I do it alone. Human clay cannot help me."

"Why should this house in which I was born have voices which you can hear, and yet for me hold only silence—for me who love every stone in the fabric, for me who have wept the most passionate tears in my life for her I lost here?"

"Because between the disembodied soul and you there is the barrier of the flesh; because you have given yourself up to sensuous things and sensuous pleasures; have eaten and drunk and delighted in the lowest pleasures of your kind. How should such as you hope to hold communion with the clear light of the soul released from clay? You must bring yourself nearer the condition of the dead before you can feel their influence."

"Sublimise myself by the extinguishment of every earthly passion? Nay, my ethereal friend, at two-and-thirty that is not so easy. There is something here," lightly touching his breast, "which pleads too ardently for poor humanity—the heart, Vincenti, the passionate heart of manhood.

Do not believe those who tell you that the bad Lord Lavendale has been altogether the slave of his senses. I never loved but once with true fervour. All the rest has been vanity and confusion, the follies of a fop who wanted to lead the fashion, and ever to be first in depravity."

"You have been staunch in friendship," said Vincenti: "I can answer for that. It was a happy hour for me when you found me laid up with fever at an inn at Prague. In a situation which would have made any other Englishman shun me, you succoured and rescued me."

"One eccentricity the more in an eccentric career, my friend. I found a treasure by the wayside; and if you can but hold out long enough to make the great discovery on the threshold of which so many an adept has given up the ghost—"

"Let us not speak of that," interrupted the old man nervously; "there are some things too sublime to be debated as your English Parliament debates a vote of credit or a declaration of war. Those who have gone down to the grave have carried too many of their secrets with them. The approach to the

great secret is clouded with darkness, beset with difficulty. Yet who that has searched the secrets of Nature can doubt that there is somewhere in her mysterious realm the vital fire which can prolong the life of man, as surely as there are mineral and vegetable powers which can regulate the blood in the veins, and permeate man's whole frame with healing influences? Is there anything more miraculous in the idea of life prolonged indefinitely than in the spectacle of a fever-patient cured at the point of death? or of a brain distraught restored to sense and calmness by the physician's art?"

Lord Lavendale devoted the next morning to an interview with his steward, and while master and man were closeted in his lordship's study, Herrick Durnford set out for a long morning's ramble in the park, pleased to be free and alone—a privilege which he rarely enjoyed, as Lavendale hated solitude.

It was a lovely morning, with all the freshness of spring and all the brightness of summer. There had been cold winds all through April, and the woods had worn their wintry russet longer than

usual; but now all at once, like the unfolding of a scene in fairyland, the trees had burst into leaf, and endless varieties of vernal colour shone radiant against the cloudless blue of a May morning. Herrick, who worshipped Nature's loveliness, and who had been pent in cities of late, felt almost drunken with rapture as he roamed in those dewy glades, where every turn of the path revealed some new picture. He had some touch of poetry in his soul, which still lingered there after a youth of folly; and as the years went on there had come graver hours, in which the vanity and evil of his life had been as plain to his eyes as it had ever been in the sight of his worst enemy. He had been baptised Herrick at the desire of his mother, who was a descendant of the poet's family; and now on this fair May morning, amidst the changeful lights and shadows, his sympathy with Nature was keen as that of him who sang the glory of the daffodil and the brief beauty of the rose.

He had been wandering for a couple of hours flinging himself on the turf now and again, lying at full length upon his back, and looking up into the

unfathomable blue, listening to the skylark soaring above his head, or to the monotonous tap of the woodpecker nearer his ear, or to the too persistent cuckoo, or to the multitudinous hum of that lower life which revelled amidst the grasses and wild flowers where he lay. Life on such a morning is as exhilarating as strong wine; Nature's loveliness mounts to a man's brain, and makes him oblivious of all the cares and sorrows of existence.

Herrick Durnford's life was by no means free from care at this period. There was the sordid care of not being sure of a livelihood in the years to come, the knowledge that he had passed the meridian line of youth without having achieved even the commencement of a career. And yet he had begun so well, had made his mark at Trinity College, Cambridge, among some of the cleverest young men of his day, had been on the point of taking honours, when he fell in with Lavendale and his set, and, fascinated by the touch-and-go wit and reckless spirits of that profligate circle, had given himself up to pleasure, and just missed distinction.

The eldest son of a country parson with a numer-

ous family, utterly without patrimony, Herrick had contrived to maintain his independence so far by the use of his pen. He had turned his hand to most of the varieties of literature: had written verses, plays, political pamphlets, and even a cookery-book, and his brilliant style and fashionable connections had insured him the countenance of the publishers and the favour of the public. Whether he wrote at Istamboul, Vienna, or Rome, Herrick had always the same tone of good society, and the same air of knowing every detail of the latest scandal. That he had dressed up old stories from the scandalous memoirs of the French Court, and adapted them to Mr. Pulteney and Miss Anna Maria Gumley, or the Prince of Wales and Mrs. Bellenden, or General Churchill and Mrs. Oldfield, was to the credit of his intelligence. "When the public want a new scandal I contrive to find it for them," he said; "and if invention fail, I can at the worst resuscitate an old one."

His plays had been performed with various degrees of success; but one, *Faint Hearts and Fair Ladies*, a kind of salad or *olla podrida* made

up of scraps from Davenant, Molière, Wycherley, and Lope de Vega, had run five-and-thirty nights, had been denounced from the pulpit by Bishop Gibson, virulently abused by Jeremy Collier, and had made Mr. Durnford's reputation as a dramatist. When reproached for the reckless licentiousness of his dialogue and the immorality of his plot, Herrick shrugged his shoulders, and replied that his play was not written to be read at family prayers, nor intended for a Christmas present for school-misses of seventeen.

And now, having in some measure emptied his bag, feeling very little of the writer's impulse left in him, Herrick contemplated a future which had somewhat a dreary aspect. What was he to do for an honest living? The learned professions were closed against him. It was too late to think of law or medicine. Many a man in his position would have drifted naturally to the Church, or would have taken advantage of Lavendale's power to bestow preferment on his bosom friend. But Durnford was not base enough to carry his unbelief to the pulpit or the altar. The Church was closed against him for

ever by that melancholy materialism which had crept over him since he left college—a mind always questioning Nature and never finding any satisfactory answer.

There had been hours of despondency when he had thought of leaving England for ever, and casting in his lot with Bishop Berkeley at his new university of Bermuda; but although the bill had been passed for the endowment of the university, Walpole had not yet advanced the 20,000*l.* promised, and the Bermuda scheme was still in the clouds.

No, there was nothing for him but his pen—unless he could turn mountebank and air his handsome person on the stage. Actors were all the fashion just now, the pets and playthings of society. Or unless he could get into Parliament and sell himself to the chief of his party. Sir Robert, the great trafficker, was still in power, but his throne was tottering, and it was said that when his fall should come it would be more terrible than that of Wolsey. Ruin, impeachment, death even, loomed in that dark future for him under whose rule England had been great among the nations. There were

some who said, "If Walpole escape, Strafford was indeed a martyr."

"No, it is my pen that must support me," Herrick told himself, rambling at ease by Chase and common-land, feeling as if that fresh morning air were inspiration, and that genius and power were reviving in him. "After all, 'tis the one easy vagabond mode of life that suits my character and temperament. The lowest garreteer, the meanest hack that ever scribbled for Curl or Lintot, is more his own master than the Queen's counsel who has to fawn upon solicitors, or the parson who must preach lies once a week and prate platitudes at the deathbeds of all his parishioners. Yes, by my pen will I live; if it is a hand-to-mouth existence, it is at least free. Fancies and original notions will come to me in my garret, as the ravens came to the prophet in his cave. There is a mysterious power which feeds the invention of poor devils who have to live by their wits. An author's mind may be blank to-day, yet to-morrow teem with schemes and suggestions. And who shall say that I may not some day be famous? Joseph Addison was no better off than I

am now when good luck visited him in his garret up three pairs of stairs, in the person of Godolphin's messenger with a commission for an epic on Blenheim."

He had been wandering in the wildest part of the Chase, scaring the young pheasants from their feeding-ground, when he came suddenly upon the rough post and rail fence which divided the Lavendale domain from Fairmile Park; and he stopped, started, and clasped his hands at sight of a face and figure which seemed more like the embodiment of a musing poet's ecstasy than a being of commonplace flesh and blood.

A girlish face looked at him from a background of oak-branches, a girlish form was leaning upon the moss-grown rail, while a couple of dogs—a Newfoundland and an Irish setter—stood up with their fore-paws on the rail, and barked their loudest at the stranger.

"Down, Sappho!" to the setter; "down, Cato, down!" said the girl, laying her white hand first on one curly head and then on the other. "They won't hurt you, sir," apologetically to the stranger, for whose

blood both dogs seemed panting. "I am sorry they should be so disagreeable. Sappho, how can you? Don't you see the gentleman is not a tramp?"

Durnford looked at her, speechless with admiration. There was a freshness of youthful beauty here which came upon him like a revelation: the oval face, with its ivory tint and pale blush-rose bloom, the large violet eyes, with dark lashes, and the wavy golden hair. Never had he seen such colouring out of Italy or an Italian picture. The face was so much more Italian than English, and yet there was a sweet simplicity which was entirely native to this British soil, a candid girlish innocence, as of a girl not too closely guarded nor too much counselled by age and experience.

Those large velvety eyes looked up at him in perfect confidence.

"I thank you, madam, I am not afraid of your dogs. Down, Sappho! See, this brown, curly-eared lady is friends with me at once, and Cato looks civiller than he did just now. I have a passion for fine dogs like these, and an Irish setter is my prime favourite of all the canine race."

"My father had this one brought over from Ireland," said the girl; "she is very clever after game, but he says I am spoiling her."

"I can imagine that your kindness may have an enervating effect," said Durnford, smiling.

"But she's so clever in other ways. She begs for toast so prettily every morning at breakfast, and my governess has taught her ever so many tricks. Sappho, what will you do for your king?"

This was asked severely. Sappho looked bored, hesitated, snapped at a passing fly, and then flung herself on the ground, and sprawled there, with her tail wagging vehemently.

"Sappho!" remonstrated the girl, and the tail was quiet.

"*Dulce et decorum est*—" said Durnford, while Irene took a lump of sugar out of her apron-pocket and rewarded her favourite.

"That's more than some patriots get for their devotion," he said, laughing; and then he went on tentatively, "I think I must have the honour of conversing with Mr. Bosworth's daughter."

She answered in the affirmative; and then, in

the easiest way, they drifted into conversation, walking side by side in shade and shine, with the stout oak rail between them. Durnford talked of his recent travels; Irene told him about her governess, and the last of her music and books. It all came about as naturally as if they had both been children. They spent half an hour thus, and then parted, promising to be at the same spot at the same hour next day, when Durnford was to bring his sketch-book and show her the pencil records of his wanderings. Irene had not the slightest idea that there was anything wrong in such an arrangement. She was utterly without shyness, as she was utterly without knowledge of evil.

Durnford went back to the Abbey, feeling as Endymion might have felt after conversing with Diana. "She is as beautiful as the Goddess of Chastity, and even more innocent," he said to himself. "Lives there the traitor base enough to wrong such purity? And she is heiress to old Bosworth's fortune, which rumour has exaggerated into a million. He made money in the South Sea scheme, and he has been lucky on 'Change ever since, 'tis

said—yet these stock-jobbers often end by wrecking the palace they have reared. If she is an heiress she is not for me, save by the baseness of an elopement and a Mayfair marriage; and that were to take the vilest advantage of girlish innocence and heavenly confidence. But how fast I am running on! Because I have fallen over head and ears in love with her in the first half-hour of our acquaintance, am I such a fool as to suppose she is just as ready to fall in love with me—with a battered rake of thirty? Why, to her, doubtless, I seem a middle-aged man—a grave and philosophical personage with whom she may safely converse, as with the village doctor or the village parson. If I had appeared before her like a fine gentleman, in all the glory of Spitalfields velvet and embroidery, powder and patches, she would have fled from me, like Daphne from Phœbus; but my careless gray suit and unpowdered hair, and my careworn looks, suggested only mature years and discretion. Will she come to-morrow, I wonder? and how shall I live for twenty-four weary hours without her?"

CHAPTER VII.

"HOW SWEET AND INNOCENT'S THE COUNTRY MAID!"

RENA appeared at the promised hour next day, as punctually as if she had been indeed that spirit of the woodland to whom Herrick likened her. He showed her the contents of his sketch-book, told her more about his travels, and they talked gaily and happily for nearly an hour, when she started, looked at her watch, and vowed that she would be late for dinner, and that her governess would be waiting for her.

"Did you tell your governess of our *rencontre* yesterday, and how your dogs barked at me?" asked Durnford carelessly, yet with a keen look in his dark gray eyes.

She blushed and looked down.

"No," she faltered shyly: "she might have forbidden me to come to-day, and I wanted so much

to see the sketches. Will you mind if I tell her to-day? I think I must tell her," she pleaded, with bewitching *naïveté*. "Do you know that I never had a secret from her before?"

"Be sure if you do tell her she will forbid you ever to be civil to me again," said Durnford; "there will be an end of all our pleasant gossip across this dear old rail."

"Is it wrong, then, for me to talk to you?"

"Your governess would think it wrong: your father would shut you up and keep you on bread and water rather than leave you at liberty to talk to me."

"Why?" she asked, with a look of distress.

"Because you are a wealthy heiress and I am a poor devil—hack scribbler—living by my wits."

"But you are not a bad man?" half compassionatingly, half in terror.

"There have been many worse; yet I am far from perfect. *You* will never hear one word of evil from my lips, or inspire one base thought in my mind. To *you* I shall be all goodness."

"Then Mademoiselle cannot object to my seeing you now and then; I'll bring her here to-morrow.

She can't walk so far, but I have a pony-carriage in which I sometimes drive her round the park."

"Don't!" pleaded Herrick, clasping her hand for the first time. "Do not, for pity's sake, dispel my happy dream; do not breathe one word of your new friend to any one. Be assured it would end everything. You would fade for ever from my life, like some lovely paradisaic vision, and leave me in everlasting darkness. Let me see you now and then, just as we have met to-day. It cannot last long; I must go back to London shortly with my friend Lavendale. I shall be swallowed in the vortex of London life, full of temptations and wickednesses of every kind. Be my good angel while you can. Elderly people like your father and your governess would never be able to understand our friendship: how pure, how holy, how secure for you, how elevating for me. Do not tell your governess of my existence, Miss Bosworth, or at least tell her not until you feel there is danger or discredit in my acquaintance."

He drew himself up and took off his hat after the loftier gallantry of those days, with a dignity that

impressed the inexperienced girl. She felt somehow that he was to be trusted; just as in the first moment of their acquaintance she had turned to him with an instinctive confidence, at once admitting him to her friendship.

"I am afraid it is wrong to have a secret from my good old governess, be it ever so small a one," she said, "but I will try to oblige you, sir."

She made him a low curtsy in response to his stately bow, and ran off as lightly as a fawn, her white gown flashing amidst the trees as she melted from Herrick's vision.

After this there were many meetings, long confidences, much talk of the past and of the present, but no hint about the future; interviews at which the dogs were the only assistants, their gambols making interludes of sportiveness in the midst of gravity. Herrick kept a close watch upon himself, and breathed not one word of love. He knew instinctively that to reveal himself as a lover would be to scare his innocent mistress, and end this sweet midsummer dream of his in terror and confusion. It was as her friend, her trusted companion, that he

won her young heart, and when, on the eve of his return to London, they parted—with paleness and tears held back on her side, and on his with all the tokens of passion kept in check—it was still as her friend that he bade her good-bye.

"When I come back to Lavendale it may perchance be in a new character," he said, "would fortune only favour me."

"Why should you wish to change?" she asked. "Or is it that you are thinking of some new book or play which is to make you famous?"

Herrick blushed, recalling that play which had done most for his renown. He felt at this moment that he would rather put his right hand in the flames like Cranmer than win money or fame by such another production. But he was a creature of impulses, and the good impulses had just now the upper hand. He felt purified, lifted out of himself, in this virginal presence.

Yet as he walked back to the Manor after that tender parting—tender, albeit no word of love was spoken—his thoughts, in spite of himself, took an earthlier strain.

She had paled when they parted, and there had been a look in her eyes which revealed the dawn of love. He could not doubt that she was fond of him. Why should he not have her? A post-chaise at a handy point, a few passionate words of entreaty, tears, despair, a threat of suicide perhaps, and then off to London as fast as horses could carry them, and to handy Parson Keith, who had just set up that little chapel in Mayfair which was to be the scene of so many distinguished marriages, dukes and beauties, senators and dukes' daughters, and who boasted that his chapel was better than a bishopric. Why should he not so win her? There was no chance that he would ever win her by any fairer means. And if he, Herrick, from highflown notions of honour hung back and let her be taken to London by the Squire, she would be run after by all the adventurers in town, a mark for the basest stratagems, or perchance given to some worn-out *roué* with a high-sounding title—money trucked against strawberry-leaves.

No, these strained notions of chivalry became not a penniless devil, a man who, as his enemies said,

had to go tick for the paper on which he wrote his lampoons. If he meant to win her he should win her how and when he could, should strike at once and boldly, as your true Irish heiress-hunter stalks his quarry, seizing the first propitious moment, taking fortune's golden tide at the flood.

He told himself this, and even began to meditate his plan of attack, but in the next instant relented, remembering her innocence, her trustfulness.

"No, I will not steal her," he said. "She shall be mine if passion and resolve can win her; but she shall be mine of her own free will. She shall not be hustled or entrapped into marriage. She shall come to my arms freely as a queen who mates with a subject. She shall come to me and say, 'You, Herrick Durnford, have I chosen above all other men to share my heart and my fortune.' Yes, by Heaven, she shall ask me to marry her. There is nothing less than that which could justify a proud penniless man in marrying a woman of fortune."

Those boisterous spirits who had known Mr. Durnford in Vienna and Paris, the boon companions who had gamed and drunk and roystered with him

in the most dissipated haunts of those two dissipated cities, would assuredly hardly have recognised their sometime associate in the man who sauntered slowly through the woodland, with hands deep in pockets, bent head and dreaming eyes, full of the vision of a brighter, better, and more profitable life, which should bring him nearer the girl he loved. What would he not do for her sake, what would he not sacrifice, what might he not achieve? With such a pole-star to guide him, surely a man might navigate the roughest sea.

"I will do that which I have never yet done," he said to himself, "I will work with all my might and main. I have trifled with whatever parts Heaven has wasted on me; I have been careless of my own gifts, have contrived to get bread and cheese out of the mere scum that floats atop of my mind. I will go on another principle henceforward. I will dig deep, and if there be any genuine metal in the mine, by Heaven it shall be worked to the uttermost! If a man can win independence by his brains and an inkpot, it shall go hard if I am for ever a pauper. Rich I can never be: fortunes are not made

out of books : but I will earn an honest living ; and then if she love me well enough to say, 'My heart and fortune are yours, Herrick,' I will not blush to accept the prize, and to wear it boldly before all the world."

Sweet musings, which made the hum of summer insects and waving of summer boughs seem the very harmony of Paradise to that fond dreamer. Yet ever and anon athwart his tender reverie there came a darkening cloud of doubt.

"Dreams, Herrick, dreams!" he muttered in self-scorn. "Who knows that to-morrow night you will not be roaring drunk in some West End tavern, having lost your last shilling at hazard, or perchance breaking crowns and beating the watch, in company with some tearing midnight ramblers we wot of?"

Not one word had Durnford breathed to Lavendale about his wood-nymph. He too well knew his friend's frivolity and inconstant fancies with regard to women. A lovely heiress would have seemed a natural prey to the *roué* who had ever exercised a potent fascination over the weaker sex, and who deemed himself invincible. Lavendale had his own

pursuits at the Manor: yawned and dawdled through the day, took a hand at piquet with Durnford of an evening, sat deep into the night in the old chapel-room with the Italian student, poring over monkish manuscripts and mediæval treatises in dog Latin. Lavendale cared but little for Nature in her mildest aspects. The mountain and the torrent, stormy volcanoes, all that is wild and wonderful in Nature, had a charm for his eager soul; but the leafy glades of Surrey, the low hills and winding river, interested him no more than an enamelled picture on a snuff-box.

"I cannot conceive what you can find to amuse you morning after morning among my oaks and beeches," he exclaimed to Durnford. "You must be horribly hipped, and you will be glad to go back to London, I take it, even though the town must be almost empty of good company."

And now on this fair June morning, after taking his farewell of Irene, Herrick was surprised to see Lavendale riding along the avenue leading to the Manor House at an hour when that gentleman was generally lounging on a sofa, sipping his midday

chocolate and dallying with the *Flying Post* or *Read's Weekly Journal*.

"Why, Jack, what took your lordship out so early?" he asked, emerging from a bypath, and overtaking the sauntering horse.

"Business, Herrick, business, which means money. I have been with the village lawyer, who wrote to apprise me of an offer made by my neighbour, Mr. Bosworth, for a paddock or two adjoining his home farm—conterminous land, the fellow called it, all but worthless to me, he insinuated, and tried to make me believe it grows only docks, when it is to my knowledge as rich a pasture as any in Surrey, but to Mr. Bosworth it would be useful, to complete his ring-fence. 'Hang his ring-fence!' says I; 'what is he that his estate should be made perfect to the detriment of mine? If he wants my meadow he will have to pay for it as if it were a gold-mine in Peru.' While I was talking in comes the Squire himself, and was vastly agreeable, professing himself charmed to renew my acquaintance after so many years. He remembered seeing me with my mother, he said, when I used to ride my pony beside her

carriage, and when I was the prettiest little lad in the county. Curse his impudence for remembering me and my prettiness! And then he began to talk about the meadows. They make a little promontory or peninsula, it seems, that runs into his estate, which he has been extending on all sides ever since he owned it, and spoils the look of his territory on the map. I played him nicely, pretending to be the soul of good-nature, meaning to get a usurer's profit on my land if I consent to sell, and it ended in his asking me to dine with him to-day, and my accepting on condition that I take my friend with me. 'Where I go my friend Durnford must be made welcome,' says I. So you are booked, Herrick, for a bad dinner, since they all say that our neighbour is a skinflint."

Herrick flushed crimson with delight. To dine under the roof that sheltered her, to sit at meat with her perhaps, see her sweetly smiling at him on the other side of the board, his wood-nymph become mortal, and eating and drinking like mere vulgar clay!

"Why, Herrick, you look as pleased as if you

were asked to a state dinner at Leicester House, or to hob and nob with the chiefs of the Whig party! I thought you would be put out at having our London trip postponed for twenty-four hours."

"I have no passion for the distractions of St. James's, where I always feel a fish out of water, and I have a certain curiosity about this Squire Bosworth, whom I take to be a character."

"How pat you have his name!"

"I have a good memory for names."

"Well, hold yourself in readiness, and put on your smartest suit. Squire Hunks dines at four. I fancy it will be a Barmecide feast, such as little Pope hits off in an unpublished lampoon upon certain kinsfolk of mine. But there is a daughter, it seems, and she is to sing to us after dinner."

"What, she sings!" cried Herrick, enraptured.

"Ay, she sings, man! Why should she not sing? Half the shes in England can pipe up some kind of strain, though with ten out of every dozen that which delights the performer excruciates her audience. But Miss Bosworth is an heiress, Her-

rick, and I mean to admire, screech she even more hoarsely than our pied peacocks yonder."

"You mean to court Miss Bosworth, perhaps?" said Herrick, drawing himself up stiffly.

"I mean to do as the whim seizes me—you know I was ever a creature of whim. 'Twas a whim lost me my true love Judith: and if a whim can catch me a pretty heiress, it will be but one sharp turn of fortune's wheel from despair to rapture."

"How do you know that she is pretty?" grumbled Herrick, racked with jealousy.

"I have ears, friend, and other men have tongues. 'Twas old Hunks's lawyer sang the praises of young Miss's beauty. She is lovely, it seems, and not an atom like her father, which would indeed have been an altogether impossible conjunction."

Herrick went back to the Manor with his bosom torn by conflicting emotions—fear lest his friend should turn into his rival, joy at the thought that he was to spend some blessed hours in his idol's company. He felt as if he could hardly live till four

o'clock, so fluttered was his heart with fond expectancy. He took out his best clothes and brushed them carefully, and sighed over their shabbiness. The suit of dove-coloured velvet, silver braided, and touched here and there with scarlet, had been a handsome suit enough more than a year ago in Vienna, where it was made: but it had passed through many a rough night of pleasure, bore the stain of wine-splashes, and a burnt spot on one of the lapels from the ashes of somebody's pipe. It had the air of a coat that had lived hard, and seen bad company. Herrick flung it aside with an oath.

"I will not wear so debauched a garment," he cried; "my gray cloth coat is honest. I would rather look like a yeoman or a scrivener than like a broken-down rake."

"Why, Durnford, man, you are dressed worse than a Quaker!" exclaimed Lavendale, radiant in claret-coloured velvet coat and French-gray satin waistcoat and smalls.

"And you are vastly too smart for a country dinner-table," said Herrick.

"O, but one cannot be too fine when one is

going courting. Young misses adore pretty colours and gay clothes. I think I see the motive of your sober gray. It is pure generosity, a sacrifice to friendship; you would let me dazzle without a rival."

"Dazzle to your heart's content; shine out, butterfly. I thought a few weeks ago that you had a heart."

"You were wrong. I had a heart till Judith broke it. That was three years ago. Since she jilted me I have had nothing here but an insatiable passion called vanity, always hungering for new conquests. I am like Alexander, and lament when a day has passed without a victory. I pant to conquer the Squire's daughter. I can picture her, Herrick, a chubby-cheeked rustic beauty, all white muslin and blue ribbons."

The Lavendale coach had been ordered out to carry the two young men to Fairmile Court with all due ceremony.

"It smells as mouldy as a mausoleum," said his lordship, as he stepped into the carriage.

Fairmile Court had a less neglected and desolate aspect than it had worn fifteen years before, when

the Squire adopted the vagrant's baby. The very presence of girlhood in the gray old house seemed to have brightened it. Mademoiselle Latour's influence had also been for good; governess and pupil had contrived to inspire the scanty household with a love of neatness and order; and their own deft hands had dusted and polished the quaint old furniture, and had filled great bowls of common garden flowers, and glorified the old fireplaces with beau-pots, and had worked wonders without spending an extra shilling of the Squire's beloved money. All this had been done without any resistance offered by Mrs. Barbara Layburne, who as long as she enjoyed substantial power, ruled over the store-closets and wine-cellars, paid tradesmen and servants, and regulated supplies of all kinds, cared not who beautified rooms which she never entered, or cultivated flowers which she never looked at. As the years went by, she had retired more and more within herself, spending her days in the solitude of that little wainscoted parlour which she had chosen for her retreat on her first coming to Fairmile. It was almost the smallest, and assuredly the dismallest,

room in the house, at the end of a long dark passage, and overlooking the stable-yard. Here she lived apart from all the household, and with no companion save that old harpsichord which startled the stillness sometimes late in the evening, accompanying a contralto voice of exceptional power even in its decay. Those occasional strains of melody had a ghostlike sound to Irene's ear, and always saddened her. Indeed, Mrs. Barbara's personality had ever been one of the overshadowing influences of the girl's life. She shrank with an involuntary recoil from any intercourse with that strange wreck of the past. The pale stern face with its traces of lost beauty chilled her soul.

"I do not think you can be many years younger than Mrs. Layburne," the girl said to her governess one day.

"I doubt if she is not my junior by some years, pet."

"And yet you never give me the idea of being old, and she seems as if her youth and all its happiness must have come to an end a century ago."

"Ah, that is because my youth was a very calm and quiet business, Rena, while I doubt hers was full of incident and passion. She is an extinct volcano, my dear. The fires were all burnt out years ago, and only the dark grim mountain remains, enclosing nothing but ashes and hollowness. Such women are like corpses that walk about after the spirit has fled. Mrs. Layburne must have ceased to live long ago."

The two gentlemen were ushered into a long, low drawing-room, oak-panelled and somewhat dark, the heavy mullioned windows being designed rather for ornament than light. Some of the furniture had been new when the house was new, other things were heirlooms from an older house, and a few trifles had been added in the tea-drinking reign of that good Queen and conscientious woman who had been translated from a troubled kingdom to a peaceful one just twelve years ago. There was a harpsichord at the further end of the room, and seated near it were two ladies who rose at the entrance of the visitors, while Squire Bosworth, who had been stand-

ing with his back to the flower-bedecked hearth, came over to receive them.

"Welcome to Fairmile Court, my Lord Lavendale; your servant, Mr. Durnford," said Bosworth, as he shook hands with his guests; "my daughter, Miss Bosworth, Mademoiselle Latour."

The little old lady in gray satinet made a curtsy which bespoke Parisian elegance of the highest water, and to which Herrick responded with one of his French bows. Lavendale had eyes only for the heiress.

"Lovely as the lady in *Comus*," he said to himself, "and knows about as much of the world and its ways, I doubt. By Heaven, she is foredoomed as a prize to the boldest!"

Herrick and Irene greeted each other with a charming ceremony. Both being prepared, they acted their parts admirably.

"What do you think of him, Maman?" whispered the girl to her governess, when those two had retired from the masculine group.

"He has too much the look of a fine gentleman," answered Mademoiselle, with her eyes upon

Lavendale, "and he carries his head with an invincible air which always makes me detest a man. Do you remember that story I told you of Lauzun, who married la grande Mademoiselle?—'*Louise de Bourbon, ôtez-moi mes bottes.*' Does he not look just the kind of man to make a princess of the royal blood take his boots off, were she fool enough to marry him?"

"Why, Maman, he has a look of proud humility, but not a spark of vanity and foolishness. O, I see, you are looking at Lord Lavendale, in his velvet and satin. I was asking you about Mr. Durnford."

"Eh, child! what, the poor companion? Have you found time to spare *him* a glance, when that irresistible fopling shines and sparkles there as if he would put the very sunshine out of countenance by his brilliancy? Yes, the companion has an interesting face, very grave, yet there is a look about the corners of the mouth which bespeaks a cynical humour. He looks shabby beside his patron, and poor, and, as you say, pet, he has an air of proud humility which I rather like. It becomes a dependent to be proud."

"O, but he is no dependent. He is a writer; has written politics, and plays, and even verses," the girl answered eagerly.

"Why, child, when and where did you hear about him?"

"Dinner is served, sir," announced the old butler, whereby he unconsciously extricated Irene from a dilemma. Mademoiselle forgot the question she had asked before there was a chance of repeating it.

The dinner was much better than his lordship had anticipated, for Squire Bosworth had sent his housekeeper peremptory orders that the meal should be as good a one as could be provided on such short notice, and Mrs. Layburne knew him too well to disobey him. Rare old wines had been brought out of cobweb-festooned bins, and the good old strawberry-beds and raspberry-bushes had yielded their treasures for the dessert. Fish there was none attainable, but soup, and joints, and poultry were followed by a course of pastry and rich puddings, all in the abundant and solid fashion of the times.

Lavendale declared afterwards that he would have preferred the scantiness of Harpagon's table to this reeking profusion. "Nobody knows how to feed upon this side of the Channel," he complained. "For a man of delicate appetite, who can dine off the wing of a chicken and an olive or two, it is torture to be placed in front of a smoking sirloin, or to be asked to dive into the infinite capacities of a huge venison pie. I would rather sup on tripe or cow-heel with some of the wits and garretteers we know, than be sickened by the greasy abundance of a country gentleman's table."

But this grumbling came afterwards, and for talking's sake. Lavendale seemed very much in his element at the Squire's board, where he sat next the heiress, and talked to her of those London amusements of which she knew so little, even by hearsay.

"What, have you never seen a playhouse? never played the devil with a score or two of adorers at a masquerade?" he exclaimed.

"I have never been in London in my life," Rena answered simply.

"Impossible! Live within thirty miles of Paradise, and never try to enter its gates!"

"Your lordship forgets that my little girl yonder is not much more than a child, and knows much less of the world than many children."

"Faith, Mr. Bosworth, I believe that. There are children in London who could astonish your gray hairs: drawing-room playthings that are thought of no more consequence than a shock dog, and that nestle in their mothers' hoops open-eyed and open-eared to everything that is going on about them. I wonder little Pope in all his characters has never given us the modish child. But, seriously now, Miss Bosworth here is no longer a baby; she has been growing up, Squire, while you have looked the other way. You must take her to London next November; you must get her presented at Court, and let her have her fling in the winter."

"We'll think about it, my lord. How old are you, Irene?"

"I was eighteen last April, papa."

"Eighteen! Well, I suppose it is time you should see some good company. I shall have to

take a house at the West End, and Mademoiselle must get her fan and mantilla, and prepare to play duenna. Would you like to spend a winter in London, Rena?"

Irene hesitated, glanced at Durnford, who, on the watch for any act of beneficence from those lovely eyes, responded with an adoring look, and a little nod of the head, which meant "Snap at the offer of a London season."

She remembered how he had told her he must get his living in town.

"O my dear father, there is nothing in the world I wish for so much."

The Squire sighed. This country seclusion was safe, and suited him best. He looked thoughtfully at Lavendale. He was young, though not in his first youth; he had a respectable title, and his estate joined that which would some day belong to Irene. A match between those two must needs be advantageous—if Lavendale would altogether reform his character, and if the estate were not too heavily encumbered. The country attorney, who looked after Lavendale's property, had assured Mr. Bos-

worth that the mortgages were mere bagatelles, and of recent date. Lavendale had been extravagant, but he had started with a handsome fortune in ready money, the accumulation of his minority. "Well, we will take a taste of town pleasures," said the Squire, after a pause, "if Lord Lavendale will be our *cicisbeo* and Mentor. I have not seen the inside of a playhouse since the beginning of the century, and they tell me there are now six theatres, where there used to be but two, and that masquerades are more fashionable than ever."

They all went back to the drawing-room together, in the French fashion, which Lavendale suggested as an improvement on English manners.

"I languish till I hear Miss Bosworth sing," he cried; and at her father's bidding, Irene seated herself at the harpsichord, and began a little song of Lully's with some old French words.

How full, and round, and rich the fresh young notes sounded to ears that had been sated by fine singing in the three great capitals of London, Paris, and Vienna! and with what tender expression the singer pronounced those simple childlike lines about

Strephon, who had abandoned his hillside, and left his flock and Chloe lamenting! Strephon would be gone to-morrow, and Fairmile Park would be desolate without him. They might meet again in London in November—would so meet, most likely, for his lordship and Mr. Durnford were inseparables; but how was the yawning gulf between July and November to be bridged over? how was that great gap in time to be lived through? Irene sang song after song at his lordship's entreaty. He was not, like Mr. Topsparkle, *fanatico per la musica*, a creature who ran after *prime donne*, and thought an Italian tenor the noblest development of human genius; he could not sit at an organ and play for hours like a soul possessed by the spirit of melody; but he had a very genuine love of music, a good deal of taste, and a little knowledge, and he hung enraptured over the harpsichord, and gave Durnford innumerable agonies during every song Irene sang, agonies which poisoned the sweetness of her voice and the beauty of every melody. Scarlatti, was it? Corelli, Handel? Who cared what composer had woven that web in which his soul was caught and

tortured? She was singing to Lavendale. It was to Lavendale her lovely eyes were lifted as she answered his questions between the songs. Lavendale was stealing her heart away from him, that heart which had been so nearly his.

"He has a potency with women which is almost diabolical. It may be his faith in himself which makes him irresistible, that certainty of conquering which almost always conquers, where there are good looks and a spice of wit to sustain audacity. Yes, he will win her, or he will race me hard for the prize; but by ——," and Herrick clenched his fist, with a big oath, sitting in a shadowy corner behind the harpsichord where nobody noted him, "he shall have a fight for it! I meant to deal honestly with her, but I won't be cheated out of her love. If I can't have her with fair play, I will try foul. I won't stand on one side and doff my hat while my friend leads her to the altar."

Such a reverie as this boded ill for innocent Irene yonder, smiling at the keys of her harpsichord, her whole soul in the music, heedless of Lord Lavendale's compliments, neither valuing them nor fear-

ing them, as easy in her simplicity as a woman of fashion after her seventh season: ill, too, for Irene boded Lavendale's musing, which tended to a determination to win the heiress, and repair his fortunes with one triumphant stroke. He had been told of that great *coup* made by Mr. Bosworth during the South Sea craze—how he had bought largely when the shares were first issued; held gingerly, always on the alert for a catastrophe; and how he had played a vigorous part with the bulls in sending up the value of the stock to an almost fabulous point, and just when the town was maddest had sold his shares for exactly ten times the price at which he had bought them.

"God help the wretches who bought that rotten stock!" thought Lavendale. "He only knows how the blood of suicides and the tears of orphans may have stained that worthless paper—but that is Bosworth's business and not mine. She is the prettiest, sweetest soul I have seen for ages, and what would Lady Judith say if I faced her at fête or ridotto with such beauty and freshness hanging on my arm, and a fortune behind it? That proud soul would be

humbled at the thought of my triumph. I shall never forget her insolence as she passed me in the Park. Her pride infected the air of London for me. I would not go back to town if she were there; but the papers tell me she is queening it at Topsparkle's Abbey in Hampshire, with a houseful of grand company, all the old Tories and out-of-office gentry flattering and fawning upon her, and manœuvring for her husband's half-dozen boroughs."

Lord Lavendale's coach was announced at ten o'clock, and the two gentlemen took their leave.

"If you have more guns than birds next October, you and your friends are welcome to my pheasants, Lord Lavendale," said the Squire, as he escorted his neighbour to the hall. "I am no sportsman, and I keep no company. I hope we shall see more of you when you come back from town."

"Nay, Mr. Bosworth, thirty miles is not an overwhelming distance. I think I shall take a leaf out of your book and oscillate 'twixt town and country. I have an old house in Bloomsbury which ought to be aired occasionally; and I have a place here that has been too long abandoned to rats and solitude.

Pray do not think that you are rid of me till October."

They parted with cordial hand-shakings, and an assurance on his lordship's part that there should be no difficulty about the peninsula of meadow-land.

"By Heaven, Herrick, she is an angel!" cried Lavendale, when he and his friend were snug in the coach.

"You say that of every handsome woman you meet, from a duchess to a rope-dancer," growled Herrick.

"Ay, but there are many degrees in the angelic host, and there are fallen angels, and those whose wings are but slightly smirched. This one is pure and radiant as the seraph Abdiel when he left the revolted host, and flew straight to the throne of the Eternal. She is the divinest creature I ever met—"

"Not excepting Lady Judith!"

"Come, there is nothing divine about *her*. We are both agreed on that point. Never from her baby-hood was she as pure and childlike as this heavenly

recluse. She is adorable, Herrick, and if I have any charm or power with women—"

"O, the hypocrisy of that 'if'!" cried his friend, with a mocking laugh.

"Well, I will phrase it otherwise. Whatever influence I have over the softer sex shall be exerted to the utmost to win that lovely soul—"

"And her hundred thousand or million, or whatever it may be," sneered the other.

"And her fortune, which will help to set me up in respectability. Why, with such wealth I might hope to buy political followers enough to make me Prime Minister. But she is so completely lovely that I swear I should be over head and ears in love with her if she were a milkmaid."

"Yes, and would take her for your plaything and grow tired of her in a month, and forsake her and leave her to die heart-broken," said the other.

"Why, Herrick, you are all bitterness to-night. You have drunk just too much to be civil and too little to be good company. You are in the cantankerous stage of inebriety. Why should you begrudge me an heiress if I have the wit to win one? God

knows I have never grudged you anything, and it is your own fault that we have not been more equal partakers of fortune."

"Forgive me, Jack, you are always generous to me: but it is because I know you have sometimes been ungenerous to women that I feel surly and sullen about this one. I know, too, that your heart belongs to Lady Judith—that were you to marry this dear innocent girl to-morrow you would desert her the day after, did that old love of yours but beckon you with her little finger. Would it not be wiser to be true to the ancient flame and see what kindly Fate may do for you? Mr. Topsparkle is past sixty and has lived hard. Why should you not wait till the inevitable reaper mows down that full-bottomed wig of his?"

"Nay, Herrick, 'tis ill waiting for dead men's shoes, and I doubt if Mr. Topsparkle's be not a better life than mine. He has taken care of himself and been cautious even in his pleasures, while I have defied Fate. There is something here," touching his breast, "which warns me that I must make the most of a short life."

CHAPTER VIII.

"HE SPRINGS TO VENGEANCE WITH AN EAGER PACE.

LORD LAVENDALE'S house in Bloomsbury Square had an air of neglect and desolation when the two young men arrived there unexpectedly in the dusk of a summer evening, having ridden all the way from Lavendale Manor. Dreary and cold looked that dining-room in which his lordship's father had entertained the wits and politicians of King William's sober, serious reign; and where his reprobate son had rivalled his chosen model, Henry St. John, in drunkenness and profligacy, and, in sheer defiance of decency, had feasted his friends of the Calf's Head Club, on the twenty-ninth of January, with a calf's head, wearing the likeness of a kingly crown made of cut lemon and parsely, to symbolise that royal martyr whose sad memory the Whigs loved to insult and outrage; and where the Mohawks had held many a revel, and brought many a victim, faint, breathless,

and half-dead with terror, to suffer some finishing touch of brutality from those civilised savages, and then to be turned out upon the town again and bade go take the law of their tormentors.

"What fools we have been in this room, Herrick!" said Lavendale, drawing his chair to the hearth, where his man had lighted some logs, the night being damp, and his lordship feeling chilly after his long ride. "What senseless saturnalia we have held here at cost of health, wealth, and honour! Yet that is what we called life in those days—to be blind-drunk and half-mad, and to dance in a circle round some unoffending cit, pricking his poor innocent legs with the points of our swords, or to tilt some harmless servant-wench feet upwards and frighten her into an apoplexy."

"Or to tip the lion, Jack; that was, I think, our highest achievement. Shall you ever forget how we flattened the nose of the Jew money-lender, and sent him home, moaning, and howling on Adonai?"

"Ay, that was a noble retribution; *that* I am proud to remember."

"Or when we lured old Mother Triplet of the India shop in Paternoster Row from her cosy back-parlour, on pretence of treating her to a cowheel supper and rumbullion at a tavern in Newgate Street, and then sent her rolling down Snow Hill in an old tar-barrel. Methinks there was a touch of righteousness there, for she had been the ruin of many a maid and wife by her venal complaisance in finding a trysting-place for clandestine lovers."

"True, Herrick; never was a hasty journey better deserved than that comfortable stout old lady's descent of Avernus. After all, there was a kind of wild justice in most of our pranks. Would that I were young enough to play such fooleries again, or to drink the bravest of the bottle-men under the table, as I once could! But the candle is near burnt out, friend, the flame is dim and pale, and flickers in the socket ever and anon, as if it would expire in the first gust of adverse fate!"

"Tush, Jack, you love to put on the dolefuls! That melancholy air of yours has been but too successful with women. There's nothing so fascinating as the sadness of a *roué*."

"I dreamt of my mother last night, Durnford. It was Miss Bosworth's face that was in my mind as I laid my head on my pillow; but it was the mournful countenance of my mother which visited my slumbers. She pleaded with me against my evil passions, as she had done many a time when I was a wayward wilful boy; urged me to lead a good life. 'Yes, for your sake,' I answered; 'only for your sake, mother;' and woke with those words on my lips. My voice had a ghostly sound as I woke in the darkness and heard it; and after that there was not a wink of sleep for me in all the long slow hours that followed the summer dawn. I lay and thought of Judith. O Herrick, how I loved that woman!"

"Yes, and love her still, and yet would marry another."

"I must marry in order that I may mend. Nothing but a good wife and a happy home can cure my wounds. Do you call this a home, for instance?" he asked bitterly, looking round the large room, with its handsome ponderous furniture and crimson damask hangings, so dark a red as to seem almost

black in the dim light of the two tall candles. "Has it not a funereal air? And yet it smells of old orgies. It seems to me as if those curtains exhale Burgundy and champagne, and still reek of strong waters."

Late as it was by the time they had supped, Lavendale insisted upon going out and on taking Durnford with him. There would be some of the chocolate-houses or gambling-dens in the neighbourhood of Leicester Fields or Soho still open, though it was past eleven o'clock.

"I will go with you if you like," said Durnford, "but I shall be like a skeleton at your feast, for I have made up my mind never again to touch a card."

"And how many nights or hours will that mind of yours last, do you suppose, Herrick, when you hear the musical rattle of the ivories, the soft seductive sound of the dice sliding gently on to the board of green cloth? Pshaw, man! as if I did not know you, and that you are at heart a gambler!"

"Perhaps, but my gambling henceforth shall

take a loftier aim. I will play at cards with fortune, and my counters shall be courage and industry. I am going to turn over a new leaf, Jack."

"You have turned over so many that you must be pretty well through the book of good resolutions by this time. But what in the name of all that's wonderful has made you virtuous, Herrick? You are not in love with an heiress, and bent upon domesticity as I am."

"If you are so, stop at home."

"Not in this house. It smells like the tomb of dead pleasures. When I look back and think of my wild youth within these four walls I feel like an old man. And yet thirty-one is hardly on the confines of senility, is it, Herrick?"

"Thirty-one should be the bloom of youth."

"Come, boy, let us to the little chocolate-house at the corner of Golden Square, which is nearly as modish as White's, and much more select. The proprietor boasts of dukes who have been ruined on his premises, and of women of rank who have pawned more than their diamonds and parted with more than I O U's after a night at basset."

"I will go with you, but not to play," answered Herrick, as they put on their hats.

"You were always as obstinate as Old Nick. Yet you should be fond of the dice-box, for you have ever had the devil's luck at cards, and ought to live by play."

"Yes, I have had that kind of diabolical good fortune which seems like an omen that I shall be lucky in nothing else. But I am not going to live by hazard, even to oblige you. I would rather starve."

"You are right, Herrick. It is the basest mode of subsistence, or almost the basest. There are one or two worse ways of living in this modern Babylon of ours; but for a gentlemanly profession, I grant you gambling is about the worst. We need neither of us play, but we may as well stroll to Golden Square and take a dish of chocolate, and hear what is going on at the Court end of town, now that everybody is in the country, and the last good story about the Prince and his wife's waiting-woman."

"Strange how these sober Hanoverians, these passionless money-grubbers, affect the libertine airs

of a Philip of Orleans or a Duc de Richelieu," said Herrick.

"O, but we cannot do without a profligate king," exclaimed Lavendale. "See how much gayer and pleasanter town has been since sober-minded, pious, domestic Anne gave place to these gay Hanoverian dogs, who imitate old Rowley in little, yet with a certain bourgeois respectability in their arrangements to which he never condescended. See how the theatres have multiplied, and how Italian opera and French plays have thriven, in spite of the prejudiced mob; and our masquerades, balls, ridottos, call them what you will, do we not owe them also to King George, who has encouraged enterprising Heidegger? No such benefaction for a nation as a prince who loves pleasure. Trade thrives and the land fattens under the rule of a *roué*. Remember how England prospered under Charles II."

They were in the street by this time, or rather that mixture of town and country which lay between Bloomsbury and Golden Square. The rain had ceased, the sky had cleared, and the moon was high, a night such as footpads and highwaymen love not.

In this clear summer weather there were fewer murders and robberies than in the long dark nights of autumn and winter, and even that favourite haunt of London banditti, Denmark Street, St. Giles's, might be passed with safety.

Golden Square was then one of the newest and handsomest squares in London. It had been built towards the close of the last reign, and it was here that St. John in his brief day of power had furnished and decorated a splendid mansion, from which disgrace drove him across the Channel, a fugitive in an ignominious disguise, six months after the late Queen's death, to return on sufferance only the other day, after long years of exile, with honours shorn and mind embittered ; to return as clever, as unscrupulous, and as mischievous in his impotent maturity as ever he had been in his active and brilliant youth.

The chocolate-house was full of company when the two gentlemen entered. Although London was supposed to be empty at this time of the year, there was always a section of society which preferred the town to the country—wits, journalists, actors, garreteers, reprobates of all kinds, to whom rusticity

was revolting, and the song of the nightingale an intolerable monotony. The King's Theatre was closed for the dull season, but there had been a company of French players at the new theatre on the opposite side of the Haymarket, and these had been the occasion of a good deal of talk, and some ill-feeling among the more bigoted British playgoers; for sturdy John Bull bore almost as deep a grudge against the French comedians as against Heidegger's Italian singers, who were paid better than bishops or Cabinet Ministers.

The company was curiously mixed on this particular evening. At one table sat a little group of fashionable gentlemen, including a brace of peers and a baronet; at another a knot of pamphleteers, in which Mr. Philter was conspicuous by the loudness of his voice and the arrogance of his opinions.

"A new poem by the Poet Pug," he cried, in answer to a grave-looking gentleman opposite him; "a satirical epic better than anything he ever writ before, say you, sir? Whoever told you of such a work was fooling you. Why, the man's vein was exhausted a year ago. His tiny talent reached its

apogee in 'The Rape of the Lock.' And to talk of a satirical epic from that effete little hunchback, whose meretricious Muse was at best but a jackdaw stalking in borrowed plumes, a mere tricky adapter of Horace and Boileau, who by the aid of a little Latin, less French, and a great deal of audacity, contrived to take the town!"

"Nay, 'twas not so much by his verse as by the magnitude of his libels and the pettiness of his amours that our Alexander the Little contrived to conquer notoriety," said Philter's umbra, fat little Jemmy Ludderly, who was supposed to live upon tripe and cowheel at the cheap eating-houses in Clare or Newport Market, except when the swaggering Philter treated him at the West End.

"You are not an admirer of Mr. Pope, sir," remarked the grave gentleman.

"No, sir. I knew his master, Dryden. I have sat at Wills's coffee-house many a night with glorious John."

"No man is glorious till after death," said the other. "I have a notion that with posterity Pope will enjoy a more universal popularity than his great

predecessor; there may be less grandeur and force in his verses, but there is more music and a finer wit. I can scarce contain my indignation against the kennel of petty curs, poetasters, caricaturists, and half-fledged wits, who are for ever libelling so great a master of his art, and who pretend to despise the finest mind in England because it has the misfortune to be allied to a misshapen body."

"I see, sir, you are a close friend of the poet's."

"I am something more, sir," replied the other, with dignity; "I am his publisher."

"Then I have the honour of addressing Mr. Lintot."

"The same, sir."

Lord Lavendale took his place at an unoccupied table, nodding to an acquaintance here and there as he passed. His entrance made a kind of faint flutter in the assembly, every one looking up from cards or conversation, pipe or glass, to note him as he went by. His person was known to almost everybody in London, and his long absence and the rumours of strange adventures in Eastern Europe had made him an object of general curiosity. People were of

different opinions as to how many duels he had fought, and how many women he had run away with; but all were agreed that his course in foreign countries had been that of a malignant star, the harbinger of dishonour and death.

"I was told Lavendale had grown old and ugly," said Lord Liskeard, a Tory peer and bosom friend of Bolingbroke, to a Whig baronet; "but to my mind he looks as handsome and as young as he did the year he stole Chichinette from the Duke of Wharton."

"Lavendale is like a beauty in her third or fourth season," answered Sir Humphrey Dalmaine. "He looks his best by candle-light."

Lavendale ordered a bowl of punch, and presently invited Mr. Philter to his table, who made no difficulty about leaving his friend Ludderly, and came over at once, charmed to hob and nob with a lord.

"Fill your glass, Tom, and tell us the news of the town," said Lavendale. "You are better than a gazette."

"I should be sorry to be as bad as the best of them, your lordship, for I never looked at a newspaper yet, Whig or Jacobite, *Flying Post* or *St*-

James's Journal, that was not a tissue of lies. I heard t'other day that Lord Bolingbroke was incubating a new journal in the interests of faction and of treachery."

"Do you know what new plot that shifty politician and her Grace of Kendal are hatching?" inquired Lavendale.

"Nothing of any moment. There has been a dead level of stagnation in Jacobite plots since the great conspiracy four years ago, when Bishop Atterbury was sent to prison, and when the Irish priest Neynoe let himself down from a two-story window by a rope of bed-clothes, leapt into the Thames, and escaped the hangman by the less discreditable fate of a watery grave. It was somewhat strange that those two arch-plotters, his Grace of Rochester and Harry St. John, should meet and cross each other at Calais, one going into exile, and t'other returning from it. Since that famous explosion of ill-directed zeal we have had nothing worth talking about in the way of plots, though you may be sure neither his Grace of Rochester nor my Lord Bolingbroke has been idle, and that the Channel between them has been

crossed pretty often by letters from the Pretender's friends."

"And for domestic news?" asked Lavendale. "Leave this great chessboard, upon which princes, bishops, and Cabinet Ministers are trying to overreach and countermarch each other, and tell us of that little world of pleasure and fashion in which we are really interested."

"There is not much stirring, except that Lady Polwhele has at last thrown off Captain Asterley. She allowed him to marry a rich tallow-chandler's daughter, upon the strict understanding that he was to ill-treat or at least neglect his wife. The tallow-chandler's daughter was young and pretty, wore her own teeth and her own hair; and Asterley was so perverse as to get fond of her, broke several appointments with her ladyship, and was foolish enough to boast of his wife's approaching maternity, which Lady Polwhele considered a premeditated insult to herself. They quarrelled, the Countess was vehement to hysteria, and Asterley appeared next day with a scratched face. A fine Angora tom-cat of her ladyship's, seeing his mistress in hysterics,

and fancying her aggrieved, had flown at the supposed assailant, and clawed him from temple to chin. So the story goes : but if ever human nails tore human countenance, those talons which clawed Asterley grew at the roseate tips of Lady Polwhele's taper fingers."

"It is like you and the town to say so," said Durnford, laughing.

"I grant that the town and I always think the worst of everybody; and that is why we are generally right. By the bye, I suppose you have heard that Lady Judith and her elderly Crœsus have been falling out?"

"Indeed!" said Lavendale, interested in a moment. "Was it about a lover?"

"A lover! No, Dian herself is not colder than Lady Judith Topsparkle, unless it were to Endymion. Of course there always is the Endymion, if one but knew where to put one's hand upon him." Mr. Philter's fingers rested airily for an instant or so on Lavendale's velvet cuff as he spoke. "No, 'twas no jealousy that roused the citizen once removed : only avarice. The quarrel was about a

game at basset, at which the lady lost something over five thousand pounds. But surely Lady Judith has a right to an expensive amusement on her side, since she is most obligingly indulgent to the gentleman's musical craze, and allows him to invite all Heidegger's crew to Ringwood Abbey, where Handel is the family idol, and where there is squalling enough to explode the roof and rouse the ghosts of all the monks from their graves."

"Play is as high as ever, then, I conclude?" said Durnford.

"Higher; people seem more eagerly bent upon losing their money now there is less money to lose, and everybody crying out that the country is on the brink of ruin. They play in the green-rooms of the theatres, at the Bath, at Leicester House, and at St. James's—everywhere. The Duke of Devonshire lost an estate t'other night at that same game of basset which nearly parted Mr. Topsparkle and his beautiful wife."

"And was the breach healed? Are they friends again?" asked Durnford.

Lavendale sat silent, with a brooding air, lis-

tening intently under those finely marked brows of his.

He had beautiful eyes, large, lustrous, of a bluish-gray, with dark lashes, eyes which had haunted the memories of the women who had loved him, even after love was dead. He had delicately cut features, a sensitive mouth, a beautifully moulded but somewhat womanish chin. It was the face of poet and dreamer, rather than of statesman, warrior, or deep thinker; yet he had none of the effeminacy of Lord Hervey, nor yet that nobleman's sickly pallor. But there was no bloom of health upon his face; his cheeks were hollow, and a hectic flush gave fire and brightness to eyes which had at other times a haggard and weary look.

"O, they are friends again, be sure," answered Philter gaily, refilling his glass with the silver ladle, which had King William's head on a crown-piece embedded in the bowl. "Topsparkle adores his wife, and is the veriest slave to her caprices. And even if he were less devoted he would hardly venture to rebel. A man of his doubtful antecedents cannot afford to wage domestic war."

"Are Mr. Topsparkle's antecedents so very bad?" asked Durnford, Lord Lavendale still keeping silence.

Mr. Philter bent across the table to answer confidentially. "I believe there is only one man in London who knows how bad, and he has just entered this room," he said, with a jerk of his thumb across his shoulder: "mum's the word."

Lavendale and Durnford looked at the new-comer. He was elderly, but well preserved, wore the most fashionable style of peruke, and had as fine a complexion as white lead and vermilion could give him, set off by elaborate patches. His mouse-coloured grosgrain suit was trimmed with a narrow edging of silver braid, his waistcoat buttons were filigree silver. His mouse-coloured silk stockings and red-heeled shoes were perfection. Nothing could be more subdued or gentlemanlike than the man's costume, nothing more graceful and unobtrusive than his air. He carried a tortoiseshell eyeglass, with which he gravely regarded the assembly as he glided sinuously through the narrow space between the tables towards one particular corner.

"That is Monsieur Fétis, Mr. Topsparkle's valet, secretary, and *âme damnée*," said Philter. "He has been in the gentleman's service for the last forty years. They were young men together. Some say he is a natural son of Topsparkle the elder by a French actress, but that is a foolish tradition. He has done Topsparkle's dirty work for forty years, been secret as the grave, and as faithful as a man who knows his interest lies in fidelity. And now he has a house in Poland Street, a useful kind of establishment, half lodging-house, half hotel, and wholly hospitable, which is rumoured to yield him two or three thousand a year. And yet he is content to curl Mr. Topsparkle's wig, and train Mr. Topsparkle's eyebrows, and apply hare's-foot and lip-salve, as submissively as the veriest drudge at twenty pound a year."

"The bond between them must be close," remarked Durnford, while Lavendale still sat brooding, with lowered eyelids and thoughtful brow.

"Be sure it is close as crime can make it," answered Philter. "There is no bond I know of

that will keep service or friendship faithful for forty years, unless it be a guilty secret."

He had drawn his chair close between Lavendale and Durnford at the beginning, and now spoke with head bent and voice lowered confidentially, so that there was little risk of his being overheard by any one beyond that table. Yet the conversation hardly seemed of a kind to be carried on in a public room.

Lavendale rose suddenly and took up his hat.

"Are you going to play to-night, Mr. Philter?" he asked.

"Your lordship ought to know that a man who lives by his pen can have very little cash to risk at the gaming-table. I come here only to see the world."

"Then if you have seen enough of it for to-night, what say you to our walking homewards together? I think your lodgings lie somewhere near Bloomsbury."

"Your lordship is right. I have some pleasant airy rooms in the Gray's Inn Road, overlooking the old Inn garden and Lord Bacon's catalpa-tree,

where I shall be enchanted to see you two gentlemen any afternoon that you will drop in upon me for a dish of tea, and will condescend to listen to an act or so of a new comedy which only cabal and self-interest have kept off the boards of Lincoln's Inn."

The three men left the tavern together, Tom Philter highly elated at being seen in the company of a man of Lavendale's rank and fashion. He could not help swaggering a little as he picked his way through the room, with elbows jauntily elevated, and slim court rapier swaying at his side, and hat cocked lightly over the left eyebrow.

"Now, Mr. Philter," said Lavendale, when they were in the shadowy street, where the lamps were unlit when the moon was at the full, albeit Luna is a somewhat capricious luminary, given to dodging behind clouds, "tell me what you mean about Vyvyan Topsparkle and his guilty secrets. You seem to be on such familiar terms with the valet that you must needs know something about the master. You and Monsieur Fétis have often hob-nobbed together, I take it."

"No, my lord, I do not chink glasses with valets,

but I have supped at his house with some of the best company in London. 'Twas a *pied-à-terre* of Wharton's when he was in his glory; and 'twas there I met the Duke of Bolton and pretty Mrs. Fenton, a poor actress but a sweet little woman, and most disinterestedly devoted to his grace."

"Pshaw, Philter! Who believes in an actress's disinterestedness? But it is not at a ducal supper-party you would hear queer stories of Mr. Top-sparkle. No one talks of the past or of the future in such uproarious society as that. Every man lives for the present moment; his hopes and his ambition are bounded by the eyes and lips that are smiling at him; his views of life are as sparkling and as transient as the bubbles on a glass of champagne, and as rosy as the deepest glow of Burgundy. You must have had better opportunities of drawing Monsieur Fétis!"

"Fétis is not a man to be drawn, my lord. Walpole himself could not extort a secret from him. He has thriven too well by fidelity to turn traitor. My intelligence comes from higher sources."

"I understand; from some friendly housemaid's

attic, no doubt," laughed Lavendale. "Don't be angry, Philter; I forgive you the sources if you will but give me your intelligence. I would give much to know that fribble's past career, with all its dark mysteries."

"That is a tangled web which will take time to unravel," answered the oracle.

"I am willing to devote time, money, patience, anything, to the unravelment!"

"I have no positive information; only vague hints which might afford a clue to a man who would take the pains to follow it."

"I am that man!" exclaimed Lavendale, putting his arm through that of Philter, who regretted that they were not in broad daylight and Bond Street. "Man," said he, "in such a quest I am a sleuth-hound."

"Well, my lord," rejoined Philter, "there is a queer story of Topsparkle's early youth which I have heard elderly men harp upon—a beautiful woman, commonly supposed to be an opera singer, whom he brought from Italy with him just before the Revolution, and kept immured in that great rambling house

of his in Soho Square. The lady was reported to be exquisitely beautiful, but as she never appeared in public the town had no opportunity of judging for itself; yet she was not the less talked about, and perhaps all the more admired, for being invisible. Then came a report that John Churchill, at that time in the bloom of his irresistible youth, flushed with his conquests of duchesses, had been seen hanging about the house; that Topsparkle was mad with jealousy, had challenged Churchill, had been laughed at and insulted, his challenge flung in his teeth. 'If a man of your quality offends me I always horsewhip him, but as you haven't offended me I have nothing to say to you,' Churchill is reported to have said in a public assemblage. 'I hope you don't suppose that the fortune your worthy alderman-father amassed by the petty chicaneries of trade can ever put you on a duelling level with gentlemen.' I had this speech verbatim from my grandfather, who was present on the occasion."

"And did Topsparkle swallow the affront?"

"There was a row, and he wanted to maul the young Alcibiades; but friends and bystanders inter-

vened, and Churchill, for the lady's sake, assured Topsparkle on his honour, that if he had been seen in Soho Square at unseemly hours, the Hero whose tower he had scaled was not Mrs. Topsparkle. The citizen's son appeared to be satisfied at this assurance, peace was made, and the town thought no more of Mr. Topsparkle's lady till a fortnight later, when a funeral was seen to leave his house in Soho Square, and a brief notice in the news-letter informed the world at large that Margharita, lady of Vyvyan Topsparkle, Esquire, had deceased on such and such a day, after twenty-four hours' illness, aged twenty-one."

"Did any one suspect foul play?" asked Lavendale.

"Society is given to that kind of suspicion; and the lady's death occurred in an agitating time, when the minds of men were full of Jesuit plots, supposititious babies, poison, and treason. I have read some curious paragraphs in the newspapers of that year, in which the suspicious circumstances of Mrs. Topsparkle's death were hinted at, together with various insinuations and innuendoes questioning the lady's

character, and suggesting that she had no legal claim to the name of Topsparkle. But it was only when Topsparkle ventured to stand for Brentford as a high Tory in the beginning of William's reign that the Whig pamphleteers and lampooners let fly their venomed arrows. Then it was broadly stated that Mr. Topsparkle had run away with an Italian dancing-girl—she was no longer a singer, you will mark: that would have been too reputable. He had stolen her out of a booth where she was Columbine to an itinerant Harlequin ; he had brought her to London, shut her up in his house in Soho Square, surprised her treachery with a gentleman of good birth and superior personal attractions, best known to society for former favours bestowed upon him by her Grace of Cleveland, and had made away with her, whether by bowstring or poisoned bowl the lampooners averred not, but bills setting forth this scandal were freely distributed in Brentford. Mr. Topsparkle was challenged with his guilt on the hustings, and narrowly escaped being mauled by the mob. It was altogether a very ugly experience in the way of electioneering adventures, and you can hardly wonder

that Topsparkle's ardour for parliamentary fame cooled from that hour."

"Did he do nothing to refute this slander?" asked Durnford.

"A great deal—and too little. He laid a criminal information against the least cautious of his libellers, and got him put in the pillory; but public feeling was altogether against the libelled gentleman, and the pillory was as a bower of roses to the venal scribbler, who doubtless had written just what he was told to write by Topsparkle's political opponent. Perhaps, had Topsparkle stayed in England and held his own boldly, the scandal would have passed as the mere scum of the political cauldron; but as he sneaked off to the Continent almost immediately afterwards, under pretence of offering his allegiance to the Royal Exile, most people were of opinion that he story was not altogether a baseless fabrication, and, taken in conjunction with the rest of Mr. Topsparkle's experiences and his personal character, the suspected tragedy put the finishing touch to a ripening reputation, and kept him out of the way of his fellow-countrymen for over thirty years."

"I should be slow to believe a slander so circulated, and resting on such slight foundations," said Lavendale gravely.

"So should I, my lord, nor have I refused Mr. Topsparkle my friendship," answered Philter, with a grand air. "I spent a week at his country seat last winter; a most magnificent mansion, a mediæval abbey furnished with all the luxuries which modern art and the invention of a sybarite could devise. Mr. Topsparkle is a connoisseur, an enthusiast in painting and sculpture, porcelains, enamels, bronzes, and boule cabinets, and as he draws upon a kind of Fortunatus's purse, he can afford to gratify every fancy, however exorbitant. Nor does he stint the pleasures of his friends. Although no sportsman, he has the finest stud and the finest stable in Hampshire, and although an absolute ascetic in his eating and drinking, he has the best table and the best cellar of any gentleman of my acquaintance."

"I can easily credit that," said Lavendale, "since I opine you do not count your moneyed friends by the dozen."

"O, but there are varieties of the species,"

answered Philter, unabashed by the snub. "There are many who have a genius for making money, but few who possess the noble art of spending it. Indeed, I doubt if you ever get those two faculties united in the same person. The man who makes his own fortune has a silly greed for keeping it. Only in the second generation of money-getters do you find the royal art of the spender and the connoisseur. Now, our friend Topsparkle was born in the purple. He was swaddled in point d'Alençon, and fed out of a parcel-gilt porringer."

"So you have been at Ringwood Abbey, Tom," said Lavendale, with a half-unconscious insolence. "The company there must be curiously mixed, I take it."

"So much the better for the company. 'Tis only in mixed society you find the true sparkle, the fire of clashing wits, the lightning flashes of adverse opinions. Yes, at Ringwood one finds every shade of opinion in politics, from the notorious Jack to the sleek Muggite—from satisfied placemen to discontented non-jurors. Bolingbroke was there last winter, the object of everybody's interest and

curiosity, after his long exile. He is as handsome as ever, and almost as fascinating as when he bewitched half the women of fashion and quality, and yet was the abject slave of Clara, a nymph who sold oranges in the Court of Requests. Now he brags of his French wife and his farm near Uxbridge, a poor plaything of a place on which he has just spent a trifling twenty thousand or so. Here he grows turnips and affects Cincinnatus, pretends to have done with politics and to live only for breeding cattle and cultivating the classics. And no sooner had that sun sunk below the horizon than there rose a more prosperous luminary in the person of Walpole. Carteret, the all-accomplished, have I met there, and punning Pulteney, and hesitating Grafton, with his grand airs of royalty by the left hand; and in fact the society at Ringwood Abbey is but a new illustration of an ancient truth, that if a man be but rich enough, he can always keep the highest company in the land."

"And how do you pay your footing among all these grandees, Mr. Philter? Do you write an acrostic for one, and a love-song for another, fetch

and carry between peers and their mistresses, or comb shock-dogs for peeresses?"

"I hope you have not such a low idea of a journalist's status, my lord. Be assured that I do nothing to degrade the dignity of letters."

"What, not borrow a ten-pound note from St. John, or sell a political secret to Walpole? Be not offended, Tom; I must have my jest. 'Tis but gaiety of spirits that makes me impertinent. And at Ringwood, now, did you surprise no domestic mysteries, hear no hints about that tragedy you have suggested?"

"Not a word. All there seemed sunshine. Topsparkle adores his wife with an almost servile devotion, lives only upon her smiles, follows in her footsteps like her lap-dog. I believe in his heart of hearts he is jealous of poor pampered pug, and would not regret to see the little beast expire of a surfeit of cream and kisses."

"And she—is she happy?" asked Lavendale, relaxing from simulated gaiety to moodiness.

"There I dare not answer off-hand. Who can swear to a fine lady's happiness? Her heart is a

close-locked coffer, of which only her abigail or her lover has the key. I can pledge myself to the brilliancy of Lady Judith's eyes and conversation, to the lightness of her foot in a minuet or a country dance, to her dash and courage in the hunting-field, her impertinence to her superiors in rank, up to the throne itself; I can testify to her superb recklessness in expenditure and her princely hospitality: but to pronounce whether she is happy or miserable must be left to her guardian angel, if she have one."

"Such a frivolous existence would be rather under the care of Belinda's ministering sylphs," said Durnford, as they turned into Bloomsbury Square.

It was after midnight, but Philter never refused a drink, so he accepted Lavendale's invitation to a bottle of some particularly choice Burgundy which had been laid down by his lordship's father. The bottle, with such a potent imbiber as Mr. Philter, led to a second, and as glass followed glass, the journalist talked more and more freely of the scandals of the town.

"But mark you, I have never heard a breath

against Lady Judith," he said; "she has the reputation of Diana's coldness backed by Juno's pride. She never has bestowed favour on mortal; she would destroy a modern Actæon for a disrespectful look; she would pursue with direst wrath the Paris who dared to place her second in the royalty of beauty. And yet I believe she is human," added Philter, with a significant glance at Lord Lavendale, "and that a passionate heart beats under the snow of that majestic bosom."

"Pray do not suspect his lordship of any designs in that quarter," said Durnford bitterly. "He has only an eye for youth and simplicity. He is courting an heiress just escaped from the nursery."

"O, but there is always a charm in bread-and-butter for your thorough *roué*," answered Philter, with a knowing air; "that hardened man about town Horace is never more enthusiastic than when he sings the half-fledged beauty shrinking from a lover's pursuit. I congratulate your lordship on the prospect of a match with youth, beauty, and bullion. I once thought my own mission would have been to marry money; but no less than three young women

of fortune whom I had at various times in tow, and almost as good as anchored in the safe harbour of matrimony, got wind of certain conquests of mine which shall be nameless, and from my infidelities as a lover doubted my capacity to keep faith as a husband."

And having hiccoughed out this boast, Mr. Philter wiped his wine-stained lips and departed.

CHAPTER IX.

"BY VOW OBLIGED, BY PASSION LED."

LAVENDALE mused and brooded upon that strange story of the man who had cheated him out of his sweetheart, if it could indeed be said that he owed the loss of Judith's hand to Mr. Topsparkle, when he had forfeited her affection by his own folly. But he was not the kind of man to reason closely upon such a matter, and he resented Judith's marriage as an act of inconstancy to himself, and Topsparkle's wealth as an impertinence. To think that the son of a City merchant should wallow in gold, entertain princes and politicians, while Lavendale groaned under the burden of an encumbered estate, and endured the curse of empty coffers!

He looked up old newspapers and magazines, called at Tom Philter's lodgings, and, with that gentleman's aid, raked over the gutter of the past

for any scrap of scandal against Mr. Topsparkle; but he could discover no more than the journalist had told him in the first instance. There had been a lady in the house in Soho Square, nearly forty years ago, and that lady had been called Mrs. Topsparkle; but as she had never appeared in public with her lord, it had been concluded that she possessed no legal right to that name. John Churchill's encounter with Topsparkle had been town talk for a week or so, the conqueror of Blenheim and Malplaquet being at that period famous only for his personal beauty, and for the scandalous adventures of his early youth—an intrigue with a duchess, a chivalrous descent from an upper window—and an imputation of venality which went to prove that the avarice of the future hero was already engrained in the stripling of the present. The mysterious lady's sudden death, in the very flower of her youth, had imparted a fictitious interest, and she had made herself briefly famous by that untimely doom. The papers gave exaggerated descriptions of her beauty, and broadly hinted that her fate had been as tragic as that of Desdemona. The *Flying Post* described

how the Nickers had broken all Mr. Topsparkle's windows with halfpence, soon after the poor lady's funeral. Topsparkle was alluded to as the City Othello, and in one scurrilous print was denounced as an "und-t-ct-d ass-ss-n." However baseless the slander may have been, it had evidently been freely circulated, and Topsparkle's subsequent residence abroad for more than a generation had given a kind of colour to the foul charge. Nor was this vaguely defined tragedy the only dusky page in the millionaire's history. His general character had been vicious, his habits on the Continent had been reported as abominable. He had been an admiring follower in the footsteps of the Regent Orleans, and of lesser lights in the same diabolical firmament.

And this man was Judith's husband. Yet what was it to him whether she was happy or miserable? that old sweetheart of his, whose round white arms had been wreathed round his neck that night in the little Chinese room at Lady Skirmisham's, what time she swore she would be his wife, and urged him to be true to her. Well, he had not been true; he

had played the fool with fortune, had sacrificed the one real love of his life to mere braggadocio and the idle vanity of an hour, and his reward was an empty heart.

Vainly did he try to fan those red embers into a new flame, to burn before a new altar. He would have been very glad to fall in love with Squire Bosworth's daughter. Again and again he told himself that she was younger and lovelier than Judith, and that in her love he might find the renewal of his wasted youth, find contentment and length of years more surely than in that sacred art which old Vincenti had cultivated with the enthusiast's devotion for nearly half a century, and which seemed to have brought him but little nearer to those three great mysteries which he sought to fathom :—

The secret of illimitable wealth by the transmutation of meanermetals into gold and silver.

The secret of prolonged existence, to be found in some universal panacea, guessed at, almost grasped, yet always escaping the seeker.

And thirdly, the secret of intellectual power—the intercommunion of flesh and deity, the link

between this mortal clay and the ethereal world of angels and demons.

It seemed to Lavendale, in his dreams of the past and of the dead, in his vivid recalling of half-forgotten words, the touch, the kiss of long ago, that this communion between severed souls was not unknown to human sense. If it could thus be granted in our sleeping hours, why not also to our waking senses? To him there was something more than mere memory in the dreamer's commune with the dead.

Vincenti pored over his old black-letter books: Roger Bacon's "Cure of Old Age;" or the "Art of Distillation, or Practical Physick, together with the preparation of Precipiolum, the Universal Medicine of Paracelsus;" or the "Golden Work of Hermes Trismegistus, translated out of Hebrew into Arabick, then into Greek, afterwards into Latin;" very precious volumes these, in the old Venetian's sight, treasuries of the wisdom of Eastern sages, hoarded up in the dim distance of the remote past to be the guide of searchers after truth in the present.

His toil of nearly half a century had brought

him to the threshold of the temple, but it had not enabled him to open the door of the sanctuary. The secret was still a secret, and he felt life waning. All those things which made this world pleasant to the common race of mortals Vincenti had sacrificed to the necromancer's grander idea of bliss; he had nothing to live for except the realisation of that one hope; and if he should die without having mastered even the meanest of those three great secrets, he must needs confess that he had lived and laboured in vain.

"Others may follow me," he said, with a simplicity of resignation that was almost heroic. "Others will read what I have written, and may profit by labours that have just missed fruition. The truth must be revealed, the secret must be found. It is only a question of time and patience."

Lavendale spent his days between London and country, rushing backwards and forwards by coach or on horseback, as whim prompted him, and in this autumn of 1726 he seemed of all men the most whimsical. London was dull and empty, half the

fashionable world was at Twickenham, and the other half at Bath; yet there was always a chance of playing deep, or of getting involved in some political plot; there were always taverns, and chocolate-houses, and clubs in full swing, and a fever of party feeling in the air, which gave a certain amount of variety and excitement to life. Bolingbroke was in London, plotting hard, and there were bets as to whether he would succeed in undermining steady-going, steadfast Robert Walpole, the greatest financier England had ever known, and the only man of capacity wide enough to foresee the peril of the South Sea Company, when to all the rest of the world that rotten fabric seemed the enchanted palace and treasury of Plutus himself, containing gold enough to enrich every one of the money-god's votaries, down to the meanest.

That stubborn good sense of his on the occasion of the South Sea fever had established Robert Walpole's reputation as a safe minister, and the sober common sense of the nation was with him. He had shown himself an advocate for peace, and Bolingbroke, who in the days of Marlborough's triumphs

in the Low Countries had cavilled at the continuance of the war, was now scornful of the Treasurer's pacific policy, and led the chorus of the disaffected to the tune of England's decay. Lavendale dined with Lord Bolingbroke more than once that autumn at his house in Pall Mall, the splendid mansion in Golden Square having passed into other hands during his lordship's exile. Lavendale was a Whig by birth and education, but his Whiggism was not strong enough to prevent his friendship with the most brilliant man of the age, or to exclude him from the most intellectual circle in England. He went down to Dawley, Bolingbroke's fancy farm near Uxbridge, where his lordship appeared to advantage in his favourite character of country squire, and where the ploughs and harrows painted in fresco on the walls of the hall indicated his bucolic bent. Here Lavendale made the acquaintance of the statesman's French wife, and here he met Pope and Swift, and Arouet de Voltaire, who had now established himself in the neighbourhood of London, a distinguished literary exile, and who was *l'ami de la maison* at Dawley.

In his wild youth, when good Queen Anne was sovereign of England, and the Mohawk Club in full swing, Lavendale had admired Henry St. John as the type and model of all that is finest in manhood. He had been then, in the insolence of power and floodtide of success, scheming for the restoration of the Stuarts, while affecting to favour the Hanoverian succession. He had ousted his old friend and patron the Duke of Marlborough, had allowed the conqueror of Ramillies and Blenheim, the man who had made our English arms as glorious as they had been in the days of the Henries and the Edwards, to be humiliated by that nation which his signal genius had elevated above all other nations. That great man, to whom England and England's Queen owed so much, had knelt at his sovereign's feet and besought her pardon and favour for his beautiful termagant, whose follies might have been forgiven for the sake of the husband who so blindly adored her. An ignominious end assuredly to royal friendship, and royal favour, and heroic genius unfortunately mated. Saddest page in the life of England's Captain-General, that scene in the palace, the kneeling

conqueror, and the stubborn Queen's unrelenting wrath.

St. John, who once wrote himself down my Lord Marlborough's most devoted and grateful servant, had helped to bring about that humiliation and that fall from power. And then came Atropos with the fatal shears, and just when the traitor's hopes were highest, and he was to play, in a strictly diplomatic and unwarlike character, the great part of General Monk, and bring about a new Restoration, with more ringing of joybells and flinging of flowers, as on the glorious twenty-ninth of May, the Queen died, and the plotter's web was rent in pieces. "What a world it is, and how does Fortune banter us!" he cried, in bitterness of spirit. Then came loss of office, six months of rustic retirement, watching for any change of the wind setting Saint-Germain-wards, then the bill of attainder, and the sudden flight of one who dared not face his accusers. Oxford, whose timidity and irresolution had been ridiculed by his high-spirited colleague, had faced the danger, and escaped it; while Bolingbroke, the high-minded and daring, had fled to France disguised

as a French messenger. And now he was in England again, debonair, audacious, favoured by his Majesty's morganatic wife, her Grace of Kendal, flattering everybody, charming everybody by his graces of person, his witchery of manner, his matchless talents, his reckless liberality.

Lavendale could but admire the sinner now, as he had admired him ten years ago, only with a less unquestioning idolatry.

"I know he is an unprincipled scamp," he told Durnford, when his friend remonstrated with him upon those long nights of brilliant talk and deep drinking which he spent with the patriot. "I know he has been a reprobate in his conduct to women, flying at all game, from the young lady of fashion to the chance Egeria of the Mall; and he could drink us bottle-men all under the table and keep his head clear to the last; yes, go straight from the carouse to his office-table and pen diplomatic correspondence, no worse for his four bottles than if he had been drinking rose-water instead of champagne. But he drinks less now, and he can hardly run after women as he used to do, since his adoring

wife watches him closer than ever Juno watched Jove."

"And in all probability with the same result."

"Nay, Herrick, he is too deeply immersed in statecraft to sacrifice to Venus. He and Pulteney have sworn an alliance. They call themselves Patriots, and are to start a newspaper before the year is out, with the help of that scamp Amhurst, whom you must remember at Oxford, where he was turned out of his college for profligacy and insubordination. I have half a mind to write for them."

"You, Lavendale! Are you going to rat—turn Jacobite?"

"No, but I am rather inclined to join the Hanoverian Tories. They have all the talents on their side. Walpole is too jealous of power. He will suffer no rival near the throne."

"I see that St. John has been poisoning your mind against the man to whom he owes his return from exile. But he who was ungrateful to Marlborough may well turn upon Walpole."

"I know not that he owes much to Walpole.

In the first place, he was promised his pardon years ago—or at any rate told he might hope for everything—by the King; and now, instead of a free pardon, he returns on sufferance, and still languishes under the attainder which keeps him out of the senate. He who would shed such an unwonted blaze of light upon that dull firmament the House of Lords is constrained to grow turnips and train foxhounds at Dawley."

"But you find he is not content with foxhounds and turnips. He is to start a party paper which will doubtless breathe the very spirit of rancorous opposition, cavil at every measure, gird at the chief minister for everything he does and everything he does not do. Take my word for it, Jack, this country of ours, with those wide dependencies which make her chief greatness, was never in safer hands than it is under Robert Walpole. Never was the ship of state sailed by a cleverer skipper than Captain Robin."

"O, I hate the man," cried Lavendale contemptuously, "with his bluff country manners and his stuttering country speech. He is on the crest of the wave just now, after the treaty of Hanover; but

wait till our friends of the opposition begin to interrogate financial matters, and you will see how heavily Sir Robert's popularity has been paid for out of the national exchequer. Why, it is said he spends a thousand a week at Houghton, to say nothing of the expenses of another establishment."

"Yes, the witch's brew has worked," said Durnford; "the magician has you in his toils. You could not have a more fatal counsellor or a more dangerous friend than Henry St. John."

"Not a word against him, Herrick; he *is* my friend."

Durnford bowed and held his peace. He was a staunch Walpolian, and had a sincere and honest regard for that great man which was entirely independent of self-interest. But as he was now writing regularly for one of the Whig journals, his friend affected to think him a party hack, and made light of all his warnings.

The friends dined at Fairmile Court about half a dozen times during the summer and early autumn, but Lavendale had not yet declared himself as a suitor either to the father or to the daughter; although

there was enough encouragement in the Squire's manner to bring about such a declaration. The feelings of the young lady herself were at that period generally regarded as a secondary consideration; but even here there was nothing on the surface to discourage a suitor. Irene welcomed Lord Lavendale and his friend with her brightest smile, seemed glad at their coming and sorry when they went. She had a bewitching air of gaiety at times which almost caught Lavendale's wavering heart; she had in other moments a pensive manner that made her seem even more beautiful than in those joyous moods. And yet he faltered in his purpose and hung back, and told himself that there was no need for haste when a man is to seal a lifelong doom.

Herrick, meanwhile, held his peace, save for an occasional word or two with his beloved, just the assurance that she was true to him and cared nothing for his brilliant friend. He dared ask no more than this. He was working hard and honestly, had thoughts of trying for a seat in Parliament at the next general election, if his friends would help him to a borough. He had flung himself heart and soul

into politics, and had abjured drink, gaming, and all those other follies which in those days went by the name of pleasure.

And now came wintry evenings and London fogs. The linkmen were busy again, there were assemblies for every night in the week, sometimes as many as seven upon one night, and women of *ton* went to half a dozen parties of an evening. Fashionable beauty's sedan was a feature in the dimly-lighted streets, escorted by running footmen armed with blunderbusses and carrying torches; cheery the flare of those torches across the darkness of night, with an occasional glimpse of beauty's face behind the glass, briefest vision of sparkling eyes, flashing gems, patches, vermilion, and powder. Now came the season of Italian opera. Society began to rave and dispute about tall lanky Farinelli with his seraphic voice, and short squabby Cuzzoni, also seraphic, and paid at a rate which made Court pensioners seem the veriest paupers; albeit that this was the golden age for place-hunters, whereby Sir Robert Walpole was able by and by to provide snug sinecures of two or three thousand a year for his younger son Horace

provision almost more generous on the part of Sir Robert than of the nation, were all things considered. Now came the season of masked balls, much affected by King George, and by his son's lesser but gayer Court at Richmond and Leicester Fields. Lavendale was well received at Richmond Lodge, where Pope and his literary friends were in great favour, and where the lovely Mary Lepel was now shining as Lady Hervey; where Chesterfield, Bathurst, Scarborough, and Hervey were the chief ornaments, all paying homage to the wit and wisdom of clever Princess Caroline, a lady of wide reading and strong opinions upon most points, yet astute enough always to play second fiddle to that dull dogged husband of hers, flattering him with subtlest flatteries, and maintaining her ascendency in spite of all rivalries; a calm, clever, far-seeing woman, of extraordinary power of mind and strength of purpose, standing firm as a rock amidst the quicksands of Court life; a woman of noble disposition, whose youth had known dependence and poverty, yet who had refused the heir to the German Empire rather than turn Papist.

At Lord Lavendale's advice, Squire Bosworth took lodgings in Arlington Street, over against Little St. James's Park, and brought his daughter to London, where she was presented to his Majesty by her aunt, Lady Tredgold, who treated herself and daughters to a London season, chiefly at Mr. Bosworth's expense, in order to perform this duty. Herrick heard of this London visit with an agonised heart: heard how Rena had been presented on the Prince's birthday, and had been admired at the birthnight ball. The town would change his wood-nymph into a fine lady; that sweet simplicity which was her highest charm would perish in the atmosphere of courts. How could he hope that she would be true to him when once she discovered the power of her position as an heiress and a beauty? She would be surrounded by fops and flatterers, run after by every adventurer in London. "And I shall rank among the meanest of them," thought Herrick. "What can I seem to her but an adventurer, when once she becomes worldly-wise and learns to estimate her own value? She will think that I tried

to trap her into an engagement; she will begin to despise me."

Agitated by these fears and doubts, Herrick found it hard to work as steadfastly and courageously as he had been working. He found it harder still to withstand the allurements of society, the chocolate-house and the green cloth, the dice-box and the bottle; more especially as Lavendale was always at his side, tempting him, accusing him of having turned dullard and miser.

"For whom are you toiling, or for what?" his lordship asked lightly. "Do you aspire to be a poet and diplomatist, like Prior, to write verses and sign treaties, and live hand in glove with statesmen and princes? Or do you want to be the petted darling of fine ladies, like Gay? Or do you think it is in you to turn satirist, and rival Pope?—who wrote me the genteelest letter you can imagine this morning, by the way, although scarce able to hold a pen for two maimed and useless fingers, having been turned over in Bolingbroke's chariot as he was driving through the lanes between Dawley and Twit'nam on a cursedly dark night. And cursed lanes

they are in bad weather, as I can affirm, having ridden through them when the mud was up to my horse's hocks. Come, Herrick, you were not made to play the anchorite. There is to be a masquerade at Heidegger's opera-house to-night, and my divinity, my wife that is to be, will be there, her first public ball. Come and be bottle-holder. I think I ought to declare myself to-night. A masquerade is a capital place for a declaration. I have been reading Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing*. What a pity that fellow's comedies are so seldom acted! There is good stuff in the worst of them."

The masked ball at the opera-house was the gayest scene in London. Every one was there, and royalty was conspicuous, first in the person of the old King, "a taciturn, rather splenetic elderly gentleman," in a snuff-coloured suit with silk stockings to match, no finery but his blue ribbon and diamond shoe-buckles, accompanied as usual by her maypole Grace of Kendal, lank, ungainly, and plain, but dear to Majesty by long habit, homely Joan to royal Darby. Her grace reigned alone since the death of the Countess of Darlington, another German lady with

English title and estates, who had fattened upon the wealth of Britannia; an obese elderly person, with round staring black eyes, reputed to have been in early life an amazing beauty. The more well informed of the German courtiers believed the tie between this lady and the King to be purely platonic, that she was indeed his Majesty's half-sister — an illegitimate daughter of the old Elector by his infamous mistress, the Countess of Platen.

The young Court, too, was there: handsome, high-bred Caroline, with her fine aquiline features and her clear, far-seeing eyes; meek Mrs. Howard, with a long-suffering air of submission to royal caprices, not by any means the triumphant style of a *maîtresse en titre;* brilliant hoydenish Mary Bellenden, now Mrs. Campbell; and sparkling Frenchified Mary Lepel, wife of John Lord Hervey; Chesterfield, airing his new title, and laying about him ruthlessly with that reckless wit which spared neither friend nor kinsfolk, heedless how deep he cut; affecting the airs of a universal conqueror also, pretending even to favours from women of the highest fashion,

rank, and beauty, despite a squat ungainly person and an ugly face.

Herrick entered late upon this brilliant scene. He had waited to finish his work at the newspaper office, a dark little printer's workshop near Smithfield, and had hastily washed off the grime of the City and flung on a domino over his every-day clothes. It was a kind of pilgrim's cloak which he wore, and he had put on a pilgrim's hat like Romeo's, and carried a pilgrim's staff, when he went in quest of his Juliet.

For the first quarter of an hour his keen eyes failed to distinguish her amidst that ever-moving, ever-changing mob of masqueraders: princes and peasants, soldiers and chimney-sweepers, French cooks, Italian harlequins and columbines, Venetians, Turks, Dutchmen, and Roman emperors. The glitter and confusion of that undulating crowd, swaying to the sound of lightest music, baffled and bewildered him; but all of a sudden, in the stately movements of a minuet, he saw a form which at a glance revealed the slender gracefulness of his wood-nymph. No other form he had ever seen upon this

earth had that airy motion and exquisitely unconscious elegance.

Yes, it was she, dressed as Diana, with a diamond crescent upon her brow, and her soft auburn hair coiled at the back of the perfectly shaped head, a careless curl or two hanging loosely from the coils. Her classic drapery of white and silver clothed her modestly from shoulder to ankle, revealing only the slender feet in silver sandals. In an age of monstrous headdresses and naked shoulders, powder and patches, that classic form and simply braided hair had all the charm of singularity.

Herrick glanced from his beloved to her partner. A slim, elegant-looking man in a Venetian suit, black velvet and gold, with jewelled stiletto—Lavendale without doubt. Yes, that was his dashing air of unconquerable self-possession, the easy consciousness of superiority. He offered his hand to his partner when the dance was over, and led her through the crowd, talking to her animatedly as they moved along. Herrick could see that he was pointing out the celebrities in the mob, giving his tongue full license as he described their characteristics, no

doubt in a series of antitheses, as was the fashion in those days, when a modish wit depicted every man or woman of his acquaintance as a bundle of opposite qualities, a creature made up of contradictions, and as impossible as sphinx or chimæra.

Herrick followed them closely. He was able to follow unobserved in that crowded assembly; moreover it was a legitimate action to follow any woman at a masquerade. The entertainment was invented for assignations and imbroglios, mystifications and illicit love-making. He followed close enough to hear the drift of his friend's conversation, if not the very words, and it relieved that sore heart of his to be assured that there was no serious love in all that flow of talk, only gallantry and compliment, scandal and satire.

"There goes my Lord Chesterfield, who just escapes being as ugly as Caliban, with that huge Polyphemus head of his, yet affects elegance and pretends to be irresistible with women. Heidegger himself—the ugliest man in London—might almost as fitly assume the airs of an Adonis. But there is Carteret, the most accomplished man in England,

with more languages in his head than were ever spoken at Babel; I must seize an opportunity for presenting him to you. He is a great man, and would be a great minister if Walpole were not jealous of him. Have you seen Mrs. Howard—the shepherdess in pink—forty years old, and as deaf as a post? Her royal shepherd was glaring at us from that box yonder while you were dancing. And at the back of that large box over the stage you may see Majesty itself, sitting in shadow with a couple of Turks in attendance upon him, and the Duchess of Kendal in the front of the box."

"I thought kings and princes would have a grander air, would stand out more from the common people," said Rena. "I did not expect to see the King in his royal robes and crown, but I am vexed to find him so very plain-looking and humdrum! I don't believe Charles I. had ever that common look."

"We only know Charles as Vandyke painted him," said Lavendale. "I daresay were I to conjure up his ghost for you, in his habit as he lived, you would find him a somewhat insignificant person, with a long narrow face and attenuated features.

You would not recognise in him the kingly figure on the white horse before which you stood so admiringly at Hampton Court Palace yesterday. But let us talk of something more interesting than kings and emperors. Let us talk of our dear selves. I have a very serious theme to discuss with you, and I thought in this light mock world, where every one is bent upon folly, you and I would be more alone than in a wood. Dare I speak freely, Irene? Will it be to seal my doom if I venture boldly?"

He had drawn the slight figure nearer to his side with a sudden caressing movement, favoured by the jostling of the crowd. Durnford grew savagely angry at that bold caress, and could scarce restrain himself from laying violent hands upon his friend; would not, perhaps, have forborne to part them, had not Rena herself started away with a half-frightened, half-indignant gesture.

But lo! at that very moment, just as Lavendale turned lightly towards the retreating nymph, bold as Apollo in pursuit of Daphne, he started and stood stock-still, as if changed into stone by some apparition of terror.

And yet it was not a terrific vision. It was only a woman, passing tall among women, with the form and carriage of Juno; a woman in a Turkish dress, glittering from brow to waistband with a galaxy of diamonds, which flashed from the gorgeous background of an embroidered robe. The lovely arms, of Parian whiteness, were bare to the shoulder; the lovely bust was but little hidden by the loose outer robe and narrow inner vest of cloth of gold. A long gauze veil fell from the jewelled turban which the lady wore, in proud defiance, or in happy ignorance, of Oriental restrictions.

This sultana of the hour was Lady Judith Topsparkle, and it was but the second time Lavendale had met her since they parted in the little Chinese room at Lady Skirmisham's.

While he stood dumfounded, scarce daring to lift his eyes to those flashing orbs which were shining upon him out of the sultana's little velvet mask, Irene drew still further away from him, unheeded, and Durnford slid in between them and slipped her hand through his arm.

"May the humblest of pilgrims be Miss Bos-

worth's guardian and defender in this unmannerly mob?" he asked tenderly.

She started, with a faintly tremulous movement which thrilled him with triumphant gladness. Only at the tone or touch of one she secretly loves is a woman so moved.

"Mr. Durnford!" she exclaimed. "How did you recognise me?"

"How did you know me so quickly, in spite of my mask?"

"By your voice, of course."

"And I you by a hundred things: by every turn of your head; by every line of your figure; by the atmosphere that breathes around you; by the halo of light which to my eye hovers perpetually round your head; by a deep delight that steals over me when you are near. And you have been in London a week and I have not seen you, and yet I have passed your door twenty times a day. Cruel, never to discover me from your window, never to make an excuse for five minutes' civility: were it but to drop an old fan in the gutter and let me pick it up for you, or to send Sappho out of doors to be all but run over,

so that I might rescue her from under a coach and six at peril of this paltry life of mine."

"Sappho is at Fairmile. My father would not let me bring her. He has promised me a pug. Why did you not pay us a visit of your own accord?"

"I was afraid. I have waited, sneak as I am, for Lavendale to take me with him."

"But why?" she asked, with divinest innocence.

"Lest the Squire should suspect me of being in love with you, and forbid me his door."

This suggestion overpowered her, and she was silent. Durnford too was silent, in a delicious pause of rapturous contentment, as he moved slowly through the crowd with his divinity on his arm.

"Is your father here to-night?" he asked presently.

"O no. He hates all such places. My aunt, Lady Tredgold, brought me. My two cousins are here, dressed as Polish peasants, but I have lost them all in the crowd. My aunt is playing cards somewhere, I believe. She left me in charge of Lord Lavendale."

"And now you are in my charge, and I shall give you up to no one but your aunt."

"My cousins told me that she will play quadrille all night if we let her alone. We shall have to go and fetch her when it is time to go home."

"That will not be till the sun is high. And then if your cousins are girls of spirit they won't be too anxious for going home. We might drive to Islington and breakfast in the gardens there by sunrise, if it were but warmer weather. Let us be happy while we can."

"I am very happy to-night," answered Rena, with delicious simplicity. "When I first came I thought this scene enchanting."

"And you don't think it less enchanting now?" asked Herrick, in a pleading tone. "Surely my presence has not spoiled it for you?"

"Indeed, no: I am very glad to see you again."

And so they wandered on, in and out amidst that giddy crowd, jostling against statesmen and fine ladies, princes and potentates; and so lost in the delight of each other's presence that they were scarce

conscious of being in company. For them that crowd of maskers was but as a gallery of pictures, mere scenic decoration, of no significance.

Lord Lavendale had been swallowed up in the throng, had vanished from their sight altogether, he and his Turkish lady. By one half-haughty, half-gracious movement of her Oriental fan she had beckoned, and he had followed, as recklessly as Hamlet followed his father's spectre, scarcely caring whither it led him, even were it to sudden, untimely death.

This Oriental lady only led the way to one of the side-rooms of the theatre—rooms where maskers supped, or gambled, or flirted, or plotted, as circumstance and character impelled them. This room into which Lavendale followed the sultana was devoted to cards, and two ladies and two gentlemen were squabbling over quadrille by the light of four tall wax candles.

Both gentlemen had removed their masks, and in one of them Lavendale recognised Mr. Topsparkle. That painted parchment face of his was scarcely more natural than a mask, and had something the look of

one, Lavendale thought, in the flickering light of those tall dim candles.

Lady Judith turned and made him a curtsy.

"Now does your lordship know who I am?" she asked.

"I knew you from the first instant of our meeting. Is there any woman in London who has the imperial air of Lady Judith Topsparkle? Could a mask hide Juno, do you think?"

"I suppose not. One ought to muffle oneself in a domino if one wanted to be unrecognised. But I question if any of us women come here with that view. We are too vain. We want everybody to say, 'How well she is looking to-night! she is positively the finest woman in the room!'"

She had sunk upon a low divan, in a careless attitude which was full of a kind of regal grace.

"I forget if you and my husband know each other?" she asked lightly.

There was not the faintest sign of emotion in her tone or her manner. Careless lightness, the airy indifference of a fashionable acquaintance, could not be more distinctly indicated.

"I have not yet had the felicity of being made known to Mr. Topsparkle," Lavendale answered, with that perfect manner of his which was exquisitely courteous, and yet gave the lady indifference for indifference.

"O, but you must know each other. You have so many ideas in common—you are both travellers, both eccentrics, both much cleverer than the common herd of humanity. Vyvyan, put down your cards for a moment if you can; here is Lord Lavendale, who complains that you have not waited upon him since he returned from the East."

"I am vastly to blame," replied Topsparkle, shifting his cards to his left hand and offering the right to Lavendale, a pallid attenuated hand, decorated with a choice intaglio and one other ring, a twice-coiled snake with a black diamond in its head, which looked like a gem with a history; "I am stricken with remorse at the idea of my neglect. But his lordship's appearance in London has been meteoric rather than regular, and I have been for the most part in the country."

"The honour of making Mr. Topsparkle's ac-

quaintance is only more precious because it has been deferred," answered Lavendale; and the two gentlemen, after having shaken hands with effusion, acknowledged each other's compliments with stately bows.

Mr. Topsparkle resumed his play, and Lavendale seated himself on the divan beside Lady Judith.

"Shall I attend you to the dancing-room?" he asked.

"No, I am sick to death of the crowd and the heat, and all those fine people," she answered, taking off her mask, and letting him see the loveliness he had once adored. "Did you observe Miss Thornleigh as Iphigenia?" she asked carelessly.

"I beheld an exquisite vision of nakedness, like Eve before the fall, at which all the world was gazing. I thought it was meant for our universal mother!"

"No, it was Iphigenia."

"I stand corrected. Then a scanty drapery of silvery gauze and a fillet round the brow mean Iphigenia. Now can I understand why Diana rejected the young lady by way of holocaust, and substituted a hind at the final moment. Such unclothed loveliness must have appalled the modest goddess."

Lady Judith laughed behind her fan, and shrugged her beautiful shoulders in the loose Turkish robe, which was decency itself in comparison with Miss Thornleigh's audacious transparency of raiment. Everything is a question of degree, and to be half naked in those days was only modish; but there was a boundary-line, and the beautiful Miss Thornleigh was considered to have overstepped it.

They talked of their acquaintance upon that crowded stage yonder, discussed the scandals of the hour, the curious marriages—an elderly lady to her footman, a gentleman of rank to an orange-girl —there had been a passion for oranges ever since the days of Nell Gwynne.

"I believe to sell oranges is the only passport to a fine gentleman's favour," said Judith. "I almost wish I had begun life with a basket, like the famous Clara, princess of the Court of Requests. I would give much to have inspired such a passion in such a man as Henry St. John."

"It is not too late, even without the oranges," answered Lavendale, smiling at her. "If St. John

was too easily melted, be sure Bolingbroke is not altogether adamant."

"O, but he has a farm and a French wife, and has turned respectable. The fiery St. John of Queen Anne's time, the hawk that swooped on every dove, is altogether extinct; there is no such person."

"Are there not rivers in Damascus?" asked Lavendale with lowered voice, drawing nearer to her as he spoke. "Are there none who can love as St. John loved—not wasting that exquisite passion upon an inconstant orange-wench, but burning his lamp of life before a higher altar, worshipping, adoring at a purer shrine?"

"Heavens, what rodomontade we are talking!" cried Lady Judith, starting up from her divan, and moving quickly to the door. "The very air of these dances is full of a jargon which even sensible people fall into unawares. Come, why do you not ask my hand for a minuet? I think you and I have danced one ages ago, and that our steps went in decent time."

"Think! Ah, I forgot how short is memory in a lady of fashion."

"O, we have so many caprices to blot the tablet. Now a new singer, and anon a new colour in lute-string, or a new style of headdress, or a new game at cards. Life is a series of transformations. Here is poor Dick Steele, struck down with paralysis, and gone to end his days in Cheshire, he who was the wittiest man in London when I first knew this town. I heard of his malady only to-night. Life is full of sad changes. One can hardly remember oneself of a few years ago, much less one's friends. But I swear I should have known your lordship anywhere."

"I am proud to be so far honoured."

They reëntered the busy scene at a pause between two dances. Everybody was walking about. The dazzle and glitter of that moving throng showed dimly through an all-pervading cloud of powder and dust, like a tropical haze on a marshy shore; the Babel of voices was bewildering to the ear.

"There goes Peterborough with Anastasia Robinson on his arm. I can swear to the turn of her head, though she has muffled herself in sables as a Russian Czarina."

"If she knew what a cook-maid the present Empress of Russia is, the lady would hardly aspire to be mistaken for her."

"O, it is only to make us all sick with envy at the splendour of her sables. His lordship bought them for her in Paris. They are worth a king's ransom. 'Tis said he allows her a hundred guineas a month, but I am sure she must spend three times as much."

"You make me feel as if I were one of the Seven Sleepers," exclaimed Lavendale. "Is not Mrs. Robinson the very pink and pattern of virtue; so chaste and cold a being that even the too tender wooing of Senesino in an opera—mere stage love-making—wounded and offended her?"

"That is perfectly true; but it is no less true that she smiles upon Lord Peterborough. Who could withstand a warrior and a hero? The man who conquered a province with a mere handful of troops must needs be irresistible to a weak woman. She is living at Parson's Green with her mother; but as Peterborough spends most of his life there, people will talk."

"In spite of the mother?"

"In spite of the mother," echoed Judith. "However, it is hinted they are privately married, and there are those among us who still continue to receive Mrs. Robinson under that charitable supposition; ourselves, for instance. Topsparkle is such a fanatic about music that I hardly dare question a soprano's reputation, or hint that a tenor has the air of having sprung from the gutter. At Ringwood Abbey we receive every one who can sing or play to perfection, without reference to character. I myself own to a prejudice in favour of those ladies who are still at their first or second lover, in preference to those who have ruined half the pretty fellows in town. But Bononcini and Handel are the two people who really choose our society. We have our Bononcini set and our Handel set, and are Italian or German as those great masters dictate. But you must come to Ringwood some day and judge for yourself. How do you like my husband?"

This was asked abruptly, with the lightest, most impertinent air.

"Mr. Topsparkle's courtesy to me just now

renders me too much his debtor to be disinterested. I am already a partial critic. But I am told by the indifferent world that he is a most accomplished gentleman."

"Yes, he is very clever. But it is a fantastical kind of cleverness. He plays the organ divinely, knows ever so many modern languages, and writes French almost as well as Monsieur le Voltaire. He has un-Englished himself by his long residence on the Continent, and must be judged by a foreign standard of taste."

"So long as he has succeeded in making you happy—" began Lavendale, in a lowered voice.

"Do I not look happy?" she asked, with smiling lips under the little velvet mask.

"You look gloriously handsome. That radiant surface is too dazzling for me to penetrate deeper. Who could question those lovely lips when they smile, or dare hint that silvery laughter might be artificial? I will believe anything those lips tell me."

"Then you may believe that Mr. Topsparkle is vastly kind, and that he has loaded me with all the

luxuries women live for nowadays: lutestring gowns, Brussels lace, diamonds, pug-dogs, black footmen, and a Swiss porter. If he cannot always insure me peace of mind it is the fault of my capriciousness, and not any lack of kindness in him. My bosom is racked at this moment by the thought of the lottery. I may win ten thousand pounds, or draw nothing but blanks. I have wasted a competence in buying up other people's tickets, for I dreamt I won the ten thousand pound prize, and I have been in a fever of expectation from that hour."

"I hope you will not be too much disappointed should the dream prove false: one of those deluding visions by which the Homeric gods lead their victims into deadly peril."

"If that dream do not come true, I swear I will never sleep again; never more trust myself in the land of lying shadows."

"The company all seem crowding to one spot. Shall we go?"

"Yes, this instant. It is nearly time for the lottery."

She took his arm, leaning on it in her eager haste,

and her lovely arm was pressed against his heart, beating passionately with all the old fever. It was an unholy fever, for in his heart of hearts he knew that she was not a good woman, that she had deteriorated sorely since their last parting, that wealth and pride of place and the flatteries of a modish mob had perverted all of good that had been left in her nature in those old days when she was Lady Judith Walberton. Her reckless conversation, her air of audacity, which seemed to challenge the rekindling of old fires, shocked even while it captivated him. There was a strange mixture of love and pity in his mind as he gazed upon this beautiful, brilliant, and perhaps lost creature.

The lottery was attended by a maddened crowd, almost reproducing upon a small scale the fever and folly of that famous South Sea scheme, which but six years ago had spread ruin and sorrow over the land, as if it had been some scaly monster come up out of the sea to devour the inhabitants of the earth. The monster's name was Avarice or Cupidity, most fatal among all fiery dragons that feed upon the flesh of men. And now the same foul beast in little was

preying upon this modish crowd. There were women who had pledged their diamond earrings to buy tickets; there were sadder sisters who had bartered their honour: and for how many was the agony of disappointment inevitable!

For Lady Judith among others. Her eleven numbers were all blanks. She pushed her way through the mob in a towering passion.

"The whole thing is a cheat!" she exclaimed. "I believe the prize-winner goes halves with the proprietor of the lottery. There must be trickery somewhere. Did you see how delighted Lady Mary Montagu was at winning a paltry fifty pounds? That woman is as mean as Shylock or Harpagon, or as wicked old Sarah herself. I had eleven tickets, every one of them, as I thought, a lucky number: one was my age doubled; the other, Topsparkle's multiplied by nine; another had three sevens in it; another, four threes. I had chosen them with the utmost discretion; and to think there was not a winning number among the whole heap! I gave Lady Wharton a ruby ring for her ticket, one of the finest in my jewel-case, the true pigeon's-blood colour, and the creature

has jewed me out of that lovely gem for a scrap of waste pasteboard. I am provoked beyond measure!"

"But, dear Lady Judith, with inordinate wealth at your command, and with the most indulgent of husbands for your purse-bearer, is it worth your while to gamble?"

"Is any pleasure worth one's while?" she retorted mockingly. "They are all empty; they are all Dead Sea apples that turn to dust and ashes. One may as well take diversion one way as another. Topsparkle thinks he is happy when he has collected a pack of squalling Italians or sourcrout-eating Germans under his roof; and yet they contrive to keep him in a fever, by their bickerings and grumblings and envyings, from the moment of arrival to the moment of departure. Will you help me to find my chair? I suppose there will be some of my men in the vestibule, if they are not all drunk at some low mug-house."

"I will answer for finding you a couple of sober chairmen. You will not wait for Mr. Topsparkle?"

"I would not disturb his game for worlds; for though he pretends I am the only gamester in the

family, he has a passion for quadrille. He learnt the taste in the south of France, where they play hardly anything else."

They went to the vestibule, where Lady Judith Topsparkle's running footmen were lolling against the wall or lounging about in company with a crowd of other lacqueys, all slightly the worse for twopenny ale, but fairly steady upon their well-fed legs, nevertheless. Lady Judith's liveries of orange and brown were distinguishable by their sombre richness among gaudier suits of blue and silver or peach-blossom and gold.

"My roquelaure," she said to one of her men, a gigantic blackamoor who had served in the Royal Schloss at Berlin, and had been tempted away from his Prussian Majesty's service by larger offers from Mr. Topsparkle. His startling appearance had fascinated the wealthy Englishman, who was instantly eager to add this exotic grace to his household.

The giant spread a fur-lined cloak over her ladyship's shoulders, a cloak of paduasoy which enveloped the tall form from the throat to the feet.

"Let us go and look for my chair," she ex-

claimed impatiently. "This vestibule reeks of lamp-oil and black footmen."

Lavendale accompanied her swift footsteps out into the portico. Sedan-chairs were standing in quadruple ranks, coaches and chariots blocked the road, shining meteoric with the blaze of their lamps and the glitter of their harness, horses champing, snorting, pawing, in impatience to be moving through the cold crisp air. There was a slight frost, a faint gray fog, and, above, a new moon rode fast in a sky of steely blue, broken by dark clouds.

"I hate to be smothered in a chair after escaping from a stifling assembly-room," said Lady Judith, "and the night seems positively enchanting. Would you have the courage to walk home with me?"

"It needs the courage of a lion, yet I will face the peril for the sake of such company. But will those dainty little Turkish slippers which I observed just now keep out the cold and damp?"

"O, they are more substantial than they look, and the stones seem quite dry. I am not afraid. Juba, tell my chairmen I am going to walk."

Juba, Lady Judith's particular personal attend-

ant, was quick to marshal his men. Two went in advance of their mistress with blazing torches, two others followed, while Juba marched at the head of the little procession by way of advanced guard.

Thus attended, and leaning upon Lord Lavendale's arm, Lady Judith's progress by way of Gerard Street to Soho Square had a picturesque air which is unknown in our matter-of-fact age of well-lit streets and miniature broughams. Everything in those days was on a grandiose scale; and if people spent a good deal of money, they at least had their full value in show and glitter. Those running footmen with their flaming torches, that huge blackamoor with his splendid livery, made a display that would have graced the semi-Oriental state of a Roman Empress in the decadence of the Empire.

Gerard Street was alive with gaiety and fashion —beaux and belles arriving and departing, torches flaming, harness rattling, sedans setting down or taking up their freight at every door, footmen lounging against every railing, link-boys rushing to and fro, making believe that the night was dark, though the cold crescent moon kept peeping out from amidst

those black scurrying clouds and putting those resin-dropping links to shame.

Windows blazed with the light of many candles, and shadows flitted across many a blind. From some houses there came a gust of noise—laughter, babble, and the rattle of dice; from another, sounds of music now classic, then modern and fashionable. There was no such thing as solitude for Lavendale and Lady Judith in that walk through one of the most fashionable quarters of the town, no possibility of anything compromising or sentimental. Their talk was of the lightest—the very thistledown of polite conversation—with no more purpose or depth of meaning than there is in Mr. Pope's letters to Lady Mary written a few years before this time.

What a beautiful, frivolous, gracious creature she seemed in Lavendale's eyes as she walked by his side, moving with swift footsteps through the cold night! She carried herself superbly at all times, and walked like Diana or Atalanta. Sir Robert himself had praised her carriage, and talked of her as "a splendid mover," as if she had been one of his Norfolk hunters. She wore her mask still, and her head was muffled in

her Turkish "asmack," and her long furred mantle reached to her heels. Yet there was hardly a man at the Court end of London who would have failed to recognise the lady whom a legion of admirers at White's and at the Cocoa Tree toasted as a queen among women, and whose name had been written with a diamond on one of the toast-glasses at the Kit-Kat Club when she was fifteen.

"Tell me some of your Eastern adventures," she exclaimed presently. "I have been telling you all about our town scandals, and you have told me positively nothing of your travels. Is it true that you broke into the seraglio at Constantinople, and were set upon by a dozen blackamoors as big as Juba, and very nearly killed in the scuffle?"

"Just about as true as the most startling adventures of Marco Polo or Sir John Mandeville. I saw no more of the seraglio than the cypress-tops in the garden that surround it, and a glimpse of the palace itself through the foliage."

"But is it not true that you brought home a Circassian slave, a peerless beauty, and that you have her under lock and key at Lavendale Manor?"

"That also belongs to the Marco Polo order of adventures. No, Lady Judith, the burnt-out ashes of a heart are not to be rekindled by almond-eyed beauties with thick waists and squabby figures; I saw nothing in the East half so lovely as that which I left in the West."

"And yet we are taught to think the Orient is full of loveliness. Here we are at my door. Will you come in and wait for Mr. Topsparkle? I dare-say I shall have company, for I told half a dozen of my dearest friends they might take their chocolate with me after the masquerade."

The Soho Square of 1726 was a place of palaces, but its fashion was already waning. Monmouth House, a royal mansion built by Wren for the luckless Duke, had fallen from Lord Bateman's occupation to a public auction-room; and there were other signs of decay which indicated that Golden Square to the south, and the newly planned Cavendish Square, almost in the country, were disputing the palm with Soho, which was beginning to assume a dilapidated air; like old Lady Orkney, or any other famous Court beauty of a bygone generation.

Mr. Topsparkle's house was the largest and most regal-looking after Monmouth House. It was approached by a double flight of steps, and its pilastered balconies, pedimented windows, and Grecian cornice gave a stately air to a building which in spaciousness and elevation was magnificent.

But if the outer appearance of the mansion was noble and imposing, its interior decoration made it one of the richest and most wonderful houses in London. In all his journeyings about the face of the earth Mr. Topsparkle had amused himself by the collection of curios; and as his purse was long and his taste universal, he had gathered together the most heterogeneous assemblage of the beautiful and the ugly that had ever been amassed by one man or exhibited under one roof.

The spacious hall which Lavendale entered at Lady Judith's invitation was hung with Venetian tapestry from the palace of a fourteenth-century Doge, and almost black with age. But as a relief against that sombre background there hung a unique collection of Moorish and Indian arms, while the foreground of the room was enlivened with everything

frivolous and elegant in the way of china monsters, Meissen porcelain, carved ivory, French fans and bonbon-boxes, filigree-silver caskets, bronze statuettes, gold snuff-boxes, and Indian gods, all scattered, as it were, haphazard upon a variety of small tables of more or less eccentric designs. On the left of this hall opened a suite of drawing-rooms which served also as one continuous picture-gallery, and which contained a collection of French and Italian masters acknowledged to be one of the best in England. On the right was the dining-room—an immense apartment, which better deserved the name of banqueting-hall. Here everything was of carved oak, ponderous, gigantic, and strictly Dutch, and here the pictures were by Dutch and Flemish painters. A replica of Rubens' "Descent from the Cross" hung over the sideboard, and the rest of the wall was a mosaic of cabinet pictures, every one a gem.

The hall was lighted with clusters of wax candles in bronze candelabra dotted here and there about the tables, and making only islets of light in the gloom of those dark walls, against which Moorish breast-

plates and Indian targets flashed and gleamed with faintly phosphorescent brightness. But at one end of the hall there was an enormous wood fire, which made a rosy atmosphere all round it; and it was in this roseate glow that Judith seated herself, sinking into a capacious armchair covered with stamped and gilt leather: a chair in which it was supposed Count Egmont had sat when he was tried for his life in the Town Hall at Brussels.

She flung off cloak and mask, and appeared in all the brilliancy of gold brocade and diamonds, a beautiful dazzling apparition which seemed hardly human in that fairy-like fire-glow. She touched a little bell, and her lacqueys began to arrange a table for chocolate; and before it could be brought three of her lady friends came trooping in, also cloaked and masked, with two gentlemen in attendance upon them.

"How early you left!" said Lady Polwhele, a stout matron of fifty, revealing a bedaubed complexion and a galaxy of patches; "I saw you sneak away. Do you know that I won twenty pound? I feel in the seventh heaven. It is odiously little to

win, but it may be the turning-point of my bad luck. I have been losing persistently at every venture I have made ever since my wretched South Sea bonds, when I ought to have sold out and didn't. I could have sold them at nine hundred, Asterley, and can you believe that I was fool enough to keep them till they dropped to a hundred and twenty? The idiots about me declared there must inevitably be as rapid a rise as there had been a fall. Would you believe it, Ted?"

"I have heard the story so often that it has become an article of faith with me," answered Mr. Asterley, with a bored look. He, too, had taken off his mask, and revealed a small-featured, effeminate face and a faded complexion. He had not taken to paint yet, and he looked as if he had not slept for a week. His city-bred wife was one of Lady Polwhele's companions, for that worthy dowager had patched up a peace with her old admirer, and finding she could not dispense with the assiduities of the husband, now submitted to the society of the wife as a necessary evil. She was said to be forming Mrs. Asterley. But if the pupil was docile, the material was

of the coarsest, or so her ladyship declared in confidence to at least fifty particular friends. "I think if any one could make a fine lady out of a handsome dairymaid I ought to be able to do it," she told her intimates, when she was bemoaning Mrs. Asterley's incorrigible vulgarity.

"You have trained so many fine gentlemen that it must be agreeable to work on the other sex by way of variety," said her confidante.

"O, I have always liked to have boys of good family about me to fetch and carry," answered Lady Polwhele carelessly. "They are better than black footmen; they want no wages, and they have not that horrid African odour which makes so many fine houses smell like a zoological garden. But for Ted Asterley's sake I should really like to make his wife presentable. Her high-mettled prancing at the last birthnight ball nearly set the room in a roar. Captain Bloodyer told me that her steps in the country dance reminded him of nothing but a dealer's horse being taught to step high over bundles of straw in a livery-yard. If the creature would only be quiet there might be some hope for her, but her plebeian blood

has furnished her with a stock of animal spirits which must be her ruin."

Mrs. Asterley's spirits had not abandoned her even at three o'clock in the morning. This was her first visit to the famous house in Soho, and she ran about the room exclaiming at everything.

"Dear, what a funny room," she cried, "with all those crooked knives and pretty old dish-covers on the wall! I thought they kept the like of them in the butler's pantry, but they're mighty pretty against that carpet-work."

Then coming to a sudden stop before Lady Judith, and giggling shyly, she exclaimed, "Lord, how I should love a room just like this, your la'ship! It has such a sweet pretty murderous kind of an air, just like Bluebeard's chamber, where he kept his wives' heads. I shall ask papa to let me furnish a room the same pattern, so I shall."

"Pray do, Mrs. Asterley. The frame will charmingly suit the picture. You have a vapourish artistic air which would be admirably set off by antique furniture."

"My dear Belle, Mr. Topsparkle's old Venetian

tapestry is both priceless and unique," said her husband reprovingly.

"What, that old carpet-work on the walls? I thought they had that for cheapness."

"My sweetest love, you have no more manners than a pig," said Asterley, but with an indulgent smile at his buxom wife's low-bred simplicity which was gall and wormwood to Lady Polwhele.

"O, but when one is blest with a wealthy father it is so natural to suppose he can get one anything one fancies by paying for it. I am sure I should have thought as much if my poor dear papa had not been a pauper," said Lady Judith, with languid good-nature. "You must go to Canons or Stowe, my dear Mrs. Asterley, and look about you. You will see some very pretty ideas for rooms, which will put you in the right way of furnishing your new house."

"But we have not taken a house yet. We are in a lodging over a tallow-chandler's in the Haymarket. It is dreadful on melting days. Yet they say Mr. Addison wrote his poem on Blenheim next door. I used to think Blenheim was a battle, but Teddie says 'tis a poem."

"My sweet child, if you were to talk a little less and listen a little more, there might be some hope of your arriving at an understanding of many things that are now dark to you," said Lady Polwhele severely; and then she peered about in the great dusky apartment, and suddenly descried Lord Lavendale sitting a little way behind Lady Judith, and quite in shadow.

"As I live, it is Lavendale!" she cried; "the very man I have been pining to see these centuries. Come and sit by me on this couch, you dear pretty fellow, and tell me where you have hidden yourself since you came from the East."

"In the dismal seclusion of my father's favourite estate, and the only remnant of his property which his son's follies have left intact," answered Lavendale gravely.

"Did not I tell you so, Asterley?" exclaimed her ladyship; "there is no help for it, you see. He must marry an heiress. Did not I say so, Asterley? You and I must find him an heiress."

"Forgive me, Lady Polwhele, if I submit that although you and my friend Asterley are doubtless

admirable caterers, I would rather be my own purveyor."

"O, but heiresses are almost as extinct as the dodo. An only child of wealthy parents is the veritable black swan. And Asterley is such a diplomatist with women."

"Egad, his lordship is in the right in rejecting a lady of my choosing," simpered Asterley. "The odds are I should have insinuated my own image into the warmest corner of the dear creature's heart before I introduced my principal. Agents and proxies are always dangerous in love or matrimony."

"Would it surprise Mr. Asterley to hear that the heiress is found already?" asked Judith languidly, looking downward at the jewelled Moorish salver and chocolate service of German china which Juba and his minions had arranged on the table in front of her. The copper chocolate-pot was of curious shape, and was supposed to be as ancient as the destruction of Pompeii, and to have held some witch's concoction in the way of a philtre for love or hate. There was a tiny spirit-lamp under it, which burned with a diabolical blue flame.

"Found already, while Lavendale has been hiding in Surrey?" cried the dowager. "You astound me!"

"Yes, the young lady danced at the birthnight ball, and was the observed of all observers for her grace and beauty. Everybody was asking where she had learnt to walk a minuet with such a mixture of ease and stateliness, till Mary Campbell, who has the impudence of the devil, went about asking questions, and ferreted out the new beauty's history. She is the daughter of Squire Bosworth, Lord Lavendale's next-door neighbour, a curious old money-grubber who made a hundred thousand pounds in that odious South Sea scheme which beggared so many women of fashion and disgraced not a few: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, for instance, who still trembles at the very name of that unlucky Frenchman whose money she ventured and lost."

"And whose very warm advances she must at one time have encouraged," suggested Lady Polwhele. "Poor Molly would never have been so frightened had there not been something more than money transactions between her and Monsieur Remond. But pray tell us more of the heiress."

"She is as simple as Wycherley's country wife, but much more genteel," replied Lady Judith lightly, while Juba carried round the chocolate, and while Lavendale sat on thorns. "She has learnt to sing and dance from a lame old Frenchwoman, who taught Lady Tredgold's gaunt daughters—"

"And never succeeded in teaching them to step to the music," said Asterley.

"But this girl is a born sylph, and a musician by instinct. Topsparkle has heard of her singing, though he has never seen her, and he wants me to ask her to Ringwood. Surely you must have observed her, Lady Polwhele ?"

"I was not at the birthnight; my dearest pug had a fit of the colic so severe that I trembled lest every breath should be his last. I would not have left him for a galaxy of kings and princes."

"But you must have seen her to-night. A slim, nymph-like creature, disguised as Diana, with a silver crescent in her hair. She and Lavendale were the prettiest couple in the room."

"Lady Judith is bent upon rekindling the ashes of a long-extinguished vanity," said Lavendale.

"But you do not deny the South Sea heiress. You plead guilty to serious intentions," said Lady Polwhele, shaking her fan at his lordship in a kittenish manner.

"Gold and spices from southern seas have a pleasant sound, your ladyship," replied Lavendale easily, "and the young lady herself is as much too good for me as I am too bad for her."

"O, but a country-bred girl always doats upon a rake."

"'Tis only natural a rustic lass should be fond of making hay. I suppose it is that kind of innocent wooden rake your ladyship means. *Gaudentem patrios findere sarculo agros.*"

"No, sir, a battered, hardened, brazen, half-ruined, infidel man of fashion," answered the dowager; "that is the object a country wench admires. If you are reformed, be sure you have spoiled your chances. You cannot be too wicked to please sweet simplicity. It is only experienced women of the world, like Lady Judith and me, who have a relish for virtue."

"And then only in the abstract, I'll be sworn," cried Asterley, coming to the tray for a second cup of chocolate, and devouring cakes out of a silver filigree basket. "You relish virtue in your Locke or your Addison—a stately preachment of morality in elegant Saxon-English, but you like a man to be—a man. There is Lord Bolingbroke, for instance. Is he not the highest example of manly perfection? *Facile primus.* An easy first in everything: first in pleasure, idleness, and debauchery, as he is first in learning, diplomacy, and statesmanship."

"And in lies and craft," said Lady Judith scornfully; "there he is—what do you call it?—*primus inter primos.* I would rather have Walpole for my type of manliness. A coarser stuff, if you will, but a far more honest fabric; no such mixture of gold and tinsel, strength and rottenness."

"I forgot that your ladyship belongs to the Whig faction," said Asterley.

"O, I tie myself to no politics. If the Chevalier were a MAN, I would rather have him to rule us than this little German king. But the little Hanoverian is at least honest, and has shown his mettle against

the Turks, while the Stuarts are as false as they are feeble: ingrates to their friends and trucklers to their foes."

While she was speaking, there came a great ringing of the hall-bell, and the sound of a chair setting down outside; and then the double doors were opened, and between a lane of footmen Mr. Topsparkle sauntered in.

He had not condescended to any further disguise than a crimson damask domino, which he flung off as he entered, revealing a suit of tawny velvet embroidered with gold thread, with ruffles and cravat of finest Malines lace, his small pinched features almost overshadowed by the fulness of his somewhat old-fashioned periwig. He saluted the company with an air of being enraptured at seeing them, which was *de rigueur* in that age of compliment and all-pervading artificiality.

"I vow it is our divine Lady Polwhele, looking at least a decade younger than when these eyes last beheld her."

"Why, you foolish Topsparkle, 'twas but t'other day we met and quarrelled for a china monster—a

green dragon with a hollow stomach for burning pastilles—at the auction-room over the way."

"Ah, but that was by daylight, and a woman's beauty when she has once passed thirty is too delicate and evanescent for sunshine and open air. Buxom wenches of twenty may endure the glare and the breeze: it only makes them a trifle more blowsy; but for the refined, the intellectual, the ethereal loveliness of *womanhood*, there must be chastened light and gorgeous surroundings. This room becomes you as her rainbow and her peacocks become Juno, or as the sea-foam sets off Aphrodite."

"Flatterer!" sighed her ladyship, tapping him playfully with her fan; "you were always incorrigible. I have not forgotten the wicked things you said to me seven years ago, when we met in Venice. Come, prince of lies, show me your last new picture; you are always adding gems to your collection."

"Nay, I have forsworn painting, and live only for music. I bought a little dulcimer t'other day which belonged to good Queen Bess. Come and look at it."

Lady Polwhele followed him into the picture-gallery, which had been brilliantly lighted in the expectation of droppers-in after the masquerade. And now came more setting down of chairs, swearing at chairmen, quarrelling of link-boys, and loud ringing at the hall-bell, and some of the most modish people in London came sauntering in to sip Lady Judith's chocolate or Mr. Topsparkle's Tokay. The rooms were almost full before Lord Lavendale left; and amidst that coming and going of guests, and idle compliments and idle laughter, he had found himself several times in close converse with Judith, they two, as they had often been before, alone amidst the babble of the crowd.

She congratulated him with a prettily serious air, almost maternal, or at least sisterly, upon his approaching marriage. She told him that he had chosen wisely in selecting so lovely a girl, with a fortune large enough to pay off his mortgages and start him afresh in life.

"I protest there is nothing settled," he said. "What you have heard is but the town gossip—words without meaning. I have said not a word to the

lady. I grant you that her father has been monstrously civil to me, that he is rich while I am poor, and that our estates join. Upon my honour there is no more than this."

"O, but you have only to speak and to win. I have set my heart upon seeing your fortune mended. I have been poor myself, and know how hard it is for a patrician to be penniless. I shall ask Harpagon and his daughter to Ringwood. He is an odious miser, they tell me."

"He has lived in rather a shabby way, and I believe that to accumulate wealth is his ruling passion; but I doubt he would be willing to spend liberally upon occasion. He has been a misanthrope rather than a miser, Alceste rather than Harpagon."

"Whatever he is I will endure him, for his pretty daughter's sake."

"You are ever gracious and obliging. Good-night."

"Good-morning, for it has just chimed four."

They saluted each other with stateliest courtesy, and Lavendale left, but not to go straight back to

Bloomsbury. Late as it was, he felt there was still a chance of company and play at White's chocolate-house; so it was westward to St. James's Street he betook himself, there to lose a few of those loose guineas which he always had in his pocket, albeit he was practically a pauper.

CHAPTER X.

"AND SUDDENLY, SWEETLY, MY HEART BEAT STRONGER."

Squire Bosworth, having once consented to bring his daughter to town, was not a man to stint money in detail. He surprised his sister-in-law by the liberality of his arrangements and the liberty he allowed her in expenditure. She had excellent rooms for herself and her gaunt daughters, and a coach and four at her disposition, with free license to buy tickets for concerts, operas, masquerades, and public amusements of all kinds; and she was told to order all that was needful for the adornment of the heiress's person. Her ladyship was an old campaigner, and knew how to profit by her position. The mantua-makers and milliners who waited upon Mrs. Bosworth were tradeswomen who had supplied Lady Tredgold for a quarter of a century, and she had them,

as it were, under her thumb. "I have so little money to spend, my dears, that if I did not spend it with the same people year after year, I should not be of the slightest importance to fashionable tradesfolk. But by a steady patronage of the same people, and by always paying ready money, I have contrived to keep the best milliner and mantua-maker in London my very humble and devoted servants."

It happened, therefore, that in these halcyon days of the Arlington Street lodgings, Mrs. Amelia and Mrs. Sophia Tredgold were supplied with gowns and caps almost at half-price by these obliging and confidential purveyors. There was a handsome margin for profit upon the prices paid for Irene's Court-train and other fineries.

Everything in that wonderful world of fashion and pleasure was new and surprising to the girl who had been reared in the seclusion of Fairmile Park. She gave herself up freely to the enchantments of the dazzling, dissipated, extravagant, artificial town. She saw only the glitter and sparkle of society's surface, and knew not that the light was the phosphorescence of putrefaction; that the whole fabric, this

fairy palace gleaming with lights and breathing music, was rotten to the core, and might fall about the heads of these revellers at any moment, as that other fairy palace where Philip the Regent and his *roués* had so lately held their orgies was doomed to fall before the century should be ended.

But of all pleasures which that great city could offer to innocent youth the divinest was music, which at this period enjoyed an unbounded popularity and fashion. The one art which George I. loved was music, and to that art and its most famous professors he and his family gave the warmest encouragement. The Royal Academy for Music had only been founded six years, but the influence of such a school was already felt. Italian opera was in its glory, and the rivalry between Handel and Buononcini, and between Cuzzoni and La Faustina, was one of the most exciting topics in the whole round of society talk.

Rena revelled in that magic world of the opera. All the glamour of the stage was here intensified by the stronger magic of music. Handel's classic operas, with their wealth of melody and charm of mythologic story, opened a new world of enchantment to the

girl's quick imagination. Lady Tredgold and her daughters loved the opera only because it was fashionable, and stifled many a yawn behind their Watteau fans; Rena and Mdlle. Latour delighted in music as an epicure delights at a feast. They hung entranced upon every note, and inwardly resented the chattering and giggling of Mrs. Amelia and Mrs. Sophia, who coquetted with their admirers at the back of the box, and encouraged visits from all the most frivolous foplings of the town. Rena had no suspicion that these young fribbles came for the most part in the hope of getting a word or two with the heiress. It had never occurred to her that she was a prize for which half the young men in London would have liked to race each other.

Lord Lavendale was a frequent visitor at the house in Arlington Street, and was cordially received by Lady Tredgold, who had been intimate with his mother in her girlhood and was disposed to favour his suit. He had spoken to Mr. Bosworth, who had answered bluntly, "Win her if you can, and then we will see about paying off the mortgages on Lavendale, and joining the two estates. But I am no tyrant to

force my daughter into an uncongenial marriage. If you would have her and her fortune, you must first win her heart."

"I will try," Lavendale answered, honestly enough.

It was his resolute intention to try and gain Rena's love, and to lead a better life than he had ever led yet: to abjure the bottle and the dice-box, though both those amusements were deemed the fitting diversion for a fine gentleman's leisure. Even the graver and statelier men of the day were topers. The late Lord Oxford had been accused of coming drunk into the presence of his Queen; and Pulteney drank almost as deep as St. John. Three or four bottles of Burgundy were deemed a fair allowance for a gentleman; and now the Methuen treaty, giving free trade in Portuguese wines, was bringing a heavier liquor into fashion.

Lavendale and Irene met in all the aristocratic assemblies of the day, at operas and balls, auction-rooms, Park, and Mall. They met at the house of Henrietta Duchess of Marlborough, daughter of the great Duke and widow of Lord Godolphin the states-

man, who gave musical evenings and swore by Buononcini. Here Rena beheld Mr. Congreve, *l'ami de la maison*, gouty, irritable, and nearly blind, but occasionally condescending to sparkle in brief flashes of wit. He was petted and obviously adored by the lady, who, after having had the greatest soldier and the grandest statesman of that age for father and husband, appeared to have reserved her warmest affections for a selfish old bachelor playwright.

Lavendale and Irene met each other in still higher society at St. James's, Leicester House, and Richmond Lodge, where Lady Tredgold had the entry. New and pretty faces are always welcome at Court, and it became speedily known that the charms of this particular face were fortified by a handsome fortune. The Princess of Wales was very gracious to Squire Bosworth's daughter, and Mrs. Howard smiled upon her with that sweet vague placidity which one sees in the faces of deaf people. Rena here beheld the famous Dean Swift, newly advanced to that title of Dean, and come to kiss his patroness's beautiful hand, and to sneer at all the

little great world around him in nightly letters to Stella Johnson, far away in a Dublin lodging, with small means and an elderly companion. Fond and faithful Stella may have needed those lively letters of the Dean's, with their graphic account of *his* pleasures, to cheer the slow monotony of her days.

Irene enjoyed everything, and, being nearly as innocent as Una, saw no evil under that fair outward surface of high-born society. Life flowed so smoothly and pleasantly under that superficial elegance; everybody spoke sweetly, wit was current coin, and music of the highest quality seemed the very atmosphere in which these people lived. It was but for the King to set the fashion, and everybody adored music; just as in Charles I.'s time everybody had been more or less fanatical about painters and painting. Rena moved from scene to scene with a sublime unconsciousness of evil, and late at night, or over their chocolate in the morning, would describe all she had seen and heard to her devoted governess, who shared in none of her amusements except the opera and an occasional concert, but who was always sympathetic and interested in all she heard.

"You seem to meet Lord Lavendale wherever you go," Mdlle. Latour said on one occasion, when his lordship's name had been mentioned by her pupil with perfect frankness.

"We are always meeting all the same people. When I go into a crowded room now, I seem to know everybody in it. I feel quite surprised at the sight of a stranger."

"Just as if you were an experienced fine lady," laughed Mademoiselle; "how quickly my woodland nymph has accustomed herself to the ways of this crowded fashionable town! But to return to Lord Lavendale: if you do not meet him oftener than you do other people, I think that at least you enjoy more of his society. You and he are often talking together, Mrs. Amelia told me."

"O yes, we are very good friends," the girl answered carelessly. "I think he is pleasanter than most people."

"Heart-whole, and likely to remain so, as far as Lavendale is concerned," thought the little Frenchwoman with satisfaction; for she knew too much of

his lordship's past history to approve of him as a suitor for her beloved pupil.

After a pause she said,

"By the bye, Rena, Mr. Durnford called yesterday when you were out with Lady Tredgold. It is the fifth time he has called and found you gone abroad."

Irene blushed crimson.

"O, why did you not beg him to stop till I came home?" she asked.

"My dear child, this is not my house. I have no right to give invitations."

"Yes, you have. You could have detained him if you had liked. The fifth visit! What must he think of me?"

"He confessed that he thought you somewhat a gad-about. He told me that he tried to waylay you in public resorts—in the Ring, or at the auction-rooms; but even there he had been unfortunate: when he went west, you had gone east."

Irene looked piteously disappointed.

"Five times! and I have not been told of one of those visits!" she exclaimed indignantly. "Why was that?"

"Because your aunt's footmen forgot all about it, I daresay," replied Mademoiselle. "Footmen have a knack of forgetting such visitors, especially when the visitor wears a shabby coat and may forget to emphasise his inquiries with a crown. I doubt you would never have heard of this last visit, if I had not happened to come in from my walk in St. James's Park just as Mr. Durnford knocked at the door. He stopped for a few minutes' chat on the doorstep. I told him you were to be at the opera to-night."

"Then perhaps he will go there!" cried Rena, suddenly becoming radiant, and confirming the shrewd little Frenchwoman in a suspicion which she had harboured for some time.

What a pity that Herrick Durnford was poor, and without rank or lineage to counterbalance his poverty! She knew that Squire Bosworth would favour Lavendale's suit, and would in all probability disinherit his daughter if she presumed to marry a penniless scribbler. Mdlle. Latour had enjoyed opportunities of studying the character of both these young men, and she had decided that Durnford's was the nobler nature, though there was assuredly some good in Lavendale.

CHAPTER XI.

"AND BEAUTY DRAWS US WITH A SINGLE HAIR."

CHRISTMAS was near at hand, the fox-hunting season was in full swing, and Lady Judith and Mr. Topsparkle had made up a large party for sport and music at Ringwood Abbey. Her Grace of Marlborough and Mr. Congreve were to be there; Sir Robert Walpole had promised to spend half a week away from the charms of his own beloved Houghton and his still dearer Molly Skerritt. The two spendthrift Spencers were asked, and Chesterfield; while Bolingbroke, whom Lady Judith pretended to admire more than any man living, was to be the chief star among so many luminaries.

Lady Judith affected to have taken a fancy to the new heiress, and was so pressing in her invitation to Lady Tredgold to bring her sweet niece to Ringwood for the Christmas holidays, that the good lady

could not resist the temptation to visit at a house which she had so often joined in rancorously abusing for its riotous extravagance and corrupt taste. But as Lady Judith had pointedly ignored the two gaunt daughters in her invitation, Lady Tredgold considered herself under no obligation to be grateful. She left the daughters in Arlington Street under the charge of Mdlle. Latour, and started for Ringwood with Rena and two maids in a coach and six. Had she been travelling at her own expense, she might have managed the journey with four horses, bad as the roads were ; but as Mr. Bosworth had to pay, she considered six indispensable. Had the journey been at her own cost, she might even have gone in the great heavy Salisbury coach, which, although periodically surprised by highwaymen between Putney and Kingston, or on Bagshot Heath, was perhaps somewhat safer in its strength of numbers than any private conveyance.

On this occasion she took a couple of footmen armed with blunderbusses, hid her own and the heiress's jewels in a little leather bag under the seat, and put her trust in Providence for the rest. Despite

of these precautions and of her six horses she might, perchance, have fared badly, had it not been for an unexpected reinforcement in the persons of Lavendale and Durnford, who overtook the carriage on Putney Common in the sharp frosty morning of December 21.

They were both well mounted on powerful roadsters, and followed by two grooms upon horses of scarcely inferior quality; gentlemen and servants were both armed.

Irene blushed and sparkled at sight of the two cavaliers, and Lavendale, spoiled by a decade of successes, made sure those smiles were for him.

"You are early on the road, ladies," he exclaimed gaily, "considering that it was past two this morning ere you plunged the Ridotto in untimely gloom by your departure. There were some blockheads who put down that diminished lustre to a sudden failure of the wax candles; but I knew 'twas but two pairs of eyes that had ceased to shine upon the assembly. Pray how far do you propose travelling to-day, Lady Tredgold?"

"Only as far as Fairmile. We are to lie at my

brother's house to-night, and pursue our journey at eight o'clock to-morrow morning. It is odious rising so early in winter. My niece and I dressed by candlelight, and the watchman was crying half-past six o'clock and a frosty morning when my maid came to wake me. It seemed but half an hour since I left the Ridotto."

"'Tis those short nights that shorten the measure of life, madam," said Durnford gravely. "Mrs. Bosworth will be older by ten years for the pleasures of a single season."

Her ladyship honoured the speaker with a slow, supercilious stare, and deigned no other answer.

"O, but there are some things worth wasting life for, Mr. Durnford," replied Irene, smiling at him; "the opera, for instance. I would barter a year of my old age for one night of *Rinaldo* or *Theseus*."

"A lady of eighteen is as free with the treasure of long life as a minor with his reversion," said Durnford. "Both are spendthrifts. But I, who have passed life's zenith, which with a man I take to be thirty, am beginning to be chary of my declining years. I hope to win some prize out of life's lottery,

and to live happy ever after, as they say in fairy tales. Now I conclude that 'ever after' in your story-book means a hale old age."

"Give me the present hour and its pleasures," cried Lavendale, "a bumper of rattle and excitement, filled to the brim, a long deep draught of joy, and no for-ever-after of old age and decline, in which to regret the golden days of youth. There should be no *arrière pensée* on such a morning as this, with a bright winter sun, a good trotting-horse, and beauty's eyes for our lode-stars."

"How does your lordship happen to be travelling our way?" asked Lady Tredgold.

"For the simplest of all reasons: I and my friend Durnford here are both bound for the same destination."

"You are going to Ringwood Abbey! How very curious, how very pleasant!" exclaimed the lady, in her most gracious tones; then she added with a colder air, and without looking at the person of whom she spoke, "I was not aware that Mr. Durnford was acquainted with Mr. Topsparkle."

Durnford was absorbed in the landscape, and made no reply to the indirect question.

"Mr. Topsparkle is ever on the alert to invite clever people to his house," said Lavendale, "and Lady Judith has a rage for literature, poetry, science, what you will. She is a student of Newton and Flamsteed, and loves lectures on physical science such as Desaguliers gave the town when Durnford and I were boys. Lady Judith is devoted to Mr. Durnford."

"I am charmed to learn that literature is so highly appreciated," said her ladyship stiffly.

She made up her mind that Herrick Durnford was dangerous—a fortune-hunter, doubtless, with a keen scent for an heiress; and she had observed that her niece blushed when he addressed her.

She could not, however, be openly uncivil to so close a friend of Lord Lavendale's, so the journey progressed pleasantly enough; the horsemen trotting beside the carriage like a body-guard for a while, and then dropping behind to breathe their cattle, or cantering in advance now and then when there came a long stretch of level turf by the wayside.

They all stopped at Kingston for an early dinner, and it was growing towards dusk when the coach and six fresh horses started on the second stage of the

journey. The progress became slower from this point. The road was dark, and had the reputation of being a favourite resort for highwaymen. Lady Tredgold had never yet been face to face with one of those monsters, but she had an ever-present terror of masked and armed marauders springing out upon her from every hedge. It was but last year that Jonathan Wild had paid the penalty of his crimes, and Jack Sheppard had swung the year before; and though neither of these had won his renown upon the road, Lady Tredgold vaguely associated those great names with danger to travellers. It was not so very long since the Duke of Chandos had been stopped by five highwaymen on a night journey from Canons to London; nor had her ladyship forgotten how the Chichester mail had been robbed of the letter-bags in Battersea Bottom; nor that robbery on the road at Acton, by which the wretches made off with a booty of two thousand pounds. And she had the family diamonds under the seat of the carriage, tied up in a rag of old chintz to make the parcel seem insignificant; and her point lace alone was worth a small fortune.

She counted her forces, and concluded that so long

as they all kept together no band of robbers would be big enough or bold enough to attack them.

"Don't leave us, I entreat, dear Lord Lavendale," she urged, as they crossed Esher Common. "We will drive as slow as ever you like, so as not to tire your saddle-horses. Tell those post-boys to go slower."

"Have no fear, madam," answered Lavendale gaily. "Our hacks are not easily tired. We will stick by you as close as if we were gentlemen of the road and had hopes of booty."

So they rode cheerily enough towards Fairmile. It was broad moonlight by the time they came to Flamestead Common; a clear, cold, winter moon, which lighted up every hillock and gleamed silvery upon the tiny waterpools.

Durnford had been riding close beside the coach, talking of music and plays with Irene; but as they approached this open ground where the light was clearest, he observed a change in her countenance. Those lovely eyes became clouded over, those lovely lips ceased to smile, and his remarks were responded to briefly, with an absent air.

"Why are you silent, dearest miss?" he asked. Lady Tredgold was snoring in her corner of the carriage, Lavendale was riding on the farther side of the road, and those two seemed almost alone. "Does yonder cold, pale planet inspire you with a gentle melancholy?"

"I was thinking of the past," she answered gravely, looking beyond him towards that irregular ground where flowerless furze-bushes showed black against the steel-blue sky.

"You can have no past to inspire sad thoughts. You are too young."

"One is never too young for sorrow. The memory of a companion I loved very dearly is associated with this spot."

And then she told him the story of her little adopted sister, as she had heard it often from her nurse Bridget—the little fair-haired child who seemed like her own reflection charmed into life—the happy days and evenings they two had spent together, and how death came untimely and snapped that golden thread.

"I like to look upon the place where my father

found her, and the place where she lies in her little grave," said Rena, straining her eyes, first towards the Common which they were now leaving, and then further afield to the low Norman tower of Flamestead Church.

Lady Tredgold woke suddenly when her niece relapsed into silence, and inquired where they were.

"Within half an hour of home, madam," answered Rena.

"Home!" and her ladyship, still half asleep, thought of that stately stone mansion in the fair white city of Bath, where her husband was left in solitude to nurse his gout and lament his wife's absence. Not but that Bath was a very pleasant place for a solitary man in those days, being the resort of fashion, wit, and beauty, statesmen and soldiers, men of letters and fine gentlemen, an ever-shifting gallery of faces, a various assembly of well-bred people, who all found it necessary from time to time to repair to "the Bath." Golden age for England when Continental spas were known only to the few, and when fashionable people were not ashamed to enjoy themselves on English soil. Had

not the distinguished, erratic Lord Peterborough himself been seen hurrying through those busy streets from the market to his lodgings, with a cabbage under one arm and a chicken under the other, blue ribbon and star on his breast all the same? A city of considerable latitude both as to manners and morals.

"O, you mean Fairmile," muttered her ladyship, with a disappointed air; for though she loved a season in London at somebody else's cost, she had a passion for Bath, which to her was veritably home, and in her slumberous state she had fancied herself just entering that delightful city. "I hope the beds will be aired. There was plenty of time for that queer, grim housekeeper to get my letter."

"You need have no fear, aunt. Mrs. Layburne is not an agreeable woman, but she is a very good manager. The servants all fear and obey her."

"That is just the sort of person one wants to look after a household. Your good, easy-tempered souls are no use, and they are generally arrant cheats into the bargain. Do you lie at the Manor to-night, Lord Lavendale?"

Lavendale had been riding as in a dream, with head bent, and rein loose in a careless hand. A horse less sure-footed than his famous black Styx might have stumbled and thrown him. He was thinking of Lady Judith Topsparkle; wondering why she had so urgently invited him to Ringwood Abbey, when, if she had his sense of peril, she would assuredly have avoided his company. It might be that for her the past was utterly past; so completely forgotten that she could afford to indulge herself in the latest whim of the moment. What but a whim could be her friendship for him, her eagerness to mate him with wealth and beauty? How completely indifferent must she have become to those old memories which had still such potency with him!

"Why, if she can forget, so can I," he told himself. "Should Horace be truer than Lydia to an expired love? and yet, and yet, were Thracian Chloe ten times as fair, one of those old familiar glances from Lydia's starry eyes would send my blood to fever-point."

The gentlemen escorted the coach to the very door of Mr. Bosworth's house, much to Lady Tred-

gold's contentment, as she suspected marauders even among the old elm-trunks in Fairmile avenue. Arrived at the house, her ladyship honoured Lord Lavendale with a cordial invitation to supper; but as she ignored his companion Lavendale declined her hospitality, on the ground that the horses had done so heavy a day's work that they must needs require the comfort of their own stables. And so the two gentlemen said good-night, and rode away to Lavendale Manor, after promising to be in attendance upon the ladies at eight next morning.

Nurse Bridget was in the hall, eager to welcome her dear charge, from whom she had never been parted until this winter. Nurse and nursling hugged each other affectionately, and then Bridget put back Irene's black silk hood, and contemplated the fair young face in warmest admiration.

"You have grown prettier than ever," she exclaimed, "and taller too; I protest you are taller. I hope your ladyship will pardon me for loving my pet too much to be mannerly," she added, curtsying to Lady Tredgold.

"There is nothing, my good creature, unmannerly

in affection. Yes, Miss Bosworth has certainly grown; and then she has had her stays made by my French staymaker, and that improves any young woman's figure and gives a taller air. I hope they have got us a decent supper. I am positively famished. And I hope there are good fires, for my niece and I have been starved this last two hours. The night is horribly cold. And have you aired a room for my maids?"

"Yes, my lady," and "Yes, my lady," said Bridget, with low curtsies, in reply to all these eager questions; and then Lady Tredgold and her niece followed the fat old butler—he had contrived to keep fat by sheer inactivity, in spite of Mrs. Layburne's meagre housekeeping—to the long white drawing-room, where there was a blazing log fire, and where Irene flew to her harpsichord and began to play the Sparrow Symphony from *Rinaldo*. There are moments of happiness, joyous impulses in the lives of women, which can only find expression in music.

CHAPTER XII.

"LOVE IN THESE LABYRINTHS HIS SLAVES DETAINS."

At Lavendale Manor there was no note of expectancy, no stir among the old servants. His lordship had given no intimation of his return. The grooms had to rouse their underlings in the stable from the state of beery somnolence which followed upon a heavy supper. The butler bustled his subordinates and sent off the housemaids to light fires in all the rooms his lordship affected, and in the bedroom and dressing-room known as Mr. Durnford's, and urged cook and scullions to be brisk in the preparation of a pretty little supper. Happily there was a goose hanging in the larder, ready to be clapped on the spit, and this, with the chine which had been cooked for the servants' dinner, and a large venison pasty, with half a dozen speedy sweet dishes, would make a tolerable supper for two gentlemen. The old

Italian never joined his patron at meals. He fed apart upon a diet of his own choosing, and on principles laid down by Roger Bacon and Paracelsus—taking only the lightest food, and selecting all those roots and herbs which conduce to long life.

Lavendale went straight to the old chapel, without even waiting to take off his boots. The student's attitude amidst his books and crucibles might have suggested that he had been sitting there like Frederick Barbarossa in his cave, ever since that summer evening upon which his lordship had with equal suddenness burst in upon his studies.

"Well, old friend, how do thy researches thrive? Is Hermes propitious?" asked Lavendale gaily. "Hast thou hit upon an easy way of manufacturing diamonds, or turning vulgar lead into the golden rain in which Danaë's ravisher veiled his divinity? Art thou any nearer the great secret?"

"Do you remember the infinitely little to which distance is reduced in that fable of Achilles and the tortoise?" asked Vincenti; "and how by descending to infinitesimals the logician gives the idea of progress, and thus establishes a paradox? My progress

has been infinitely little; but yes, I think there has been something gained since we parted."

The sigh with which his sentence closed was not indicative of triumph. The finely cut features were drawn with thought and care; the skin, originally a pale olive, was withered and yellow, and had a semi-transparent look, like old parchment. Death could hardly be more wan and wasted than life appeared in this searcher into the dark mysteries of man and Nature.

"You have been absent longer than usual," said the old man, "or at least it seems to me that it has been so. I may be mistaken, for I keep no actual count of time—except this bare record of years."

He turned to a flyleaf in a black-letter volume at his right hand; and on that, beginning in ink that had grown brown and pale with time, there appeared a calendar of years, and opposite each the name of a place.

This was the only record of the philosopher's existence. Lavendale's keen eye noted that it began early in the previous century, and that the hand-writing was uniform throughout, though the colour

of the ink varied. Could this man, whom he had guessed at about seventy years old, have really seen the beginning of the last century? Vincenti had been ever curiously reticent about his past life—had told his patron only one fact in his history, namely, that he was by birth and parentage a Venetian.

"No, my dear friend, you are not mistaken; I stayed longer in town than I intended when I left you. People seemed glad to see me—mere seeming, of course, since in that selfish town of ours there is not a mortal who cares a snap of the fingers for any other mortal; except lovers, and theirs is but a transient semi-selfish liking. But there is a fascination in crowds; and I saw a woman who has quite forgotten me, but whom I never can forget."

"How do you know she has forgotten you?"

"By her indifference."

"Assumed as likely as not. There is no such hypocrisy as a woman's. There are liars and traitors among men, I grant you, but with them falsehood is an acquired art. In a woman deceit is innate: a part of her very being. She will smile at you and lie to you with the virginal sweetness of sixteen

as cleverly as with the wrinkled craftiness of sixty. Never believe in a woman's affectation of indifference. It is the safest mask for passion. They all wear it."

"If I thought that it were so: if I thought Judith Topsparkle still loved me—"

"Topsparkle!" muttered the old man, staring at him in blank wonder.

"Did I think those old embers were not quite extinct, did I think that one lingering spark remained, I would risk the world to rekindle them, would perish in the blaze, die in a savage triumph of love and despair, like Dido on her pyre. But no, she is a woman of fashion pure and simple, cares no more for me than Belinda cared for Sir Plume."

"Topsparkle!" repeated Vincenti; "whom do you know of that name?"

"Only the famous Vyvyan Topsparkle, dilettante, eccentric, and Crœsus. A gentleman whose name is familiar, and even illustrious, in all the countries where works of art are to be seen and fine music is to be heard. A gentleman who left England forty years ago with a very vile reputation, and who has not improved it on the Continent; but we do not

hang men of fabulous fortune: we visit them at their country houses, ride their horses, win their money at basset, and revile them behind their backs. Mr. Topsparkle is a very fine gentleman, and has been lucky enough to marry the loveliest woman in London, who has made his house the fashion."

"Vyvyan Topsparkle! I thought he had gone into a Portuguese monastery—turned Trappist, and repented of his sins. I was told so ten years ago."

"Yes, I remember there was a rumour of that kind soon after I left the University. I believe the gentleman disappeared for some time, and stimulated the inventive powers of his friends by a certain mysteriousness of conduct; but I can assure you there is nothing of the monk about Mr. Topsparkle nowadays. He is altogether the fop and man of fashion, and, if wrinkles counted for nothing, would be almost a young man."

"He is a scoundrel, and may he meet with a scoundrel's doom!" muttered Vincenti gloomily.

"What, have you any personal acquaintance with him? Did you ever meet him in Italy?"

"Yes, more than forty years ago."

Lavendale flushed and paled again in his agitation. Here was one who perchance might help him to some clue to that old mystery, the scandal and suspected crime related by Tom Philter. He told Vincenti the story exactly as Philter had told it to him.

The old man listened intently, those dark eyes of his shining under the bushy white brows, shining with the reflected light of the fire, shining with a fiercer light from within.

"I have heard this story before," he said.

"And do you believe it? Do you believe there was foul play?"

"Yes, I believe Vyvyan Topsparkle was a murderer as well as a seducer. It is not true that his mistress was a dancing-girl. She was a girl of respectable birth, brought up in a convent—highly gifted, a genius, with the voice and face of an angel."

"Good Heaven, you speak of her with the utmost familiarity! Did you know her?"

There was a pause before the old man answered. He turned over the pages of the book he had been reading when Lavendale entered, and seemed for

the moment as if he had forgotten the subject of their conversation.

"Did you know that unhappy girl?" Lavendale asked eagerly.

"I knew something of her people," answered Vincenti, without looking up. "They belonged to the trading class of Venice, but had noble blood in their veins. The father was a jeweller and something of an artist. The girl's disappearance made a scandal in Venice. She had but just left her convent school. It was not known where the seducer had taken her. A near relative followed them—tracked them to Paris—followed them from Paris to London—in time to see a coffin carried out of the house in Soho Square, and to hear dark hints of poison. He stayed in London for nearly a year; wore out his heart in useless efforts to discover any proof of the crime which was suspected by more than one, most of all by an apothecary who was called in to see the dying girl; tried to get an order for the exhumation of the body, but in vain. He was a foreigner, and poor; Mr. Topsparkle was an Englishman of large fortune. The government scented

a Jacobite Jesuit in the Italian, or at any rate pretended to think him dangerous, and he had notice to leave the country. He left, but not before Topsparkle had fled from the blast of scandal. His attempt to become a senator confounded him. Slander had slept until the Brentford election."

"Yes, that chimes in with Philter's account," answered Lavendale. "Do you know what became of the girl's father?"

Vincenti shrugged his shoulders.

"Died, I suppose, of a broken heart. He was too insignificant to make any mark upon history."

"Well, I am quite ready to believe Mr. Topsparkle to be a double-dyed scoundrel—and yet I am going to sit at his table and sleep under his roof. That is what good company means nowadays. Nobody asks any searching questions about a host's character. If his wines and his cook are faultless, and his wife is handsome, every one is satisfied: and on this occasion Mr. Topsparkle's company is to be exceptionally distinguished. Swift is to be there, the Irish patriot and ecclesiastical Jack Pudding, who is just now puffed with importance at the suc-

cess of his queer book about giants, pigmies, and what not; and there is a talk of Voltaire, the young French wit, who has been twice beaten for his *bon-mots*, and twice a prisoner in the Bastille, and who is in England only because France is too hot to hold him. There is a promise of Bolingbroke, too, and a hint of my queer kinswoman, Lady Mary, who made such a figure the other night at the Prince's ball. We shall doubtless make a strange medley, and I would not be out of the fun for anything in this world, even though in his hot youth Mr. Topsparkle may have played the character of Othello with a phial of poison instead of a bolster. After all, Vincenti, jealousy is a noble passion, and a man may have worse motives for murder."

The old man made no answer, and as supper was announced at this moment, the conversation ended.

There was something in Lavendale's manner which told of a mind ill at ease, perchance even of a remorseful conscience; but he had the air of a man who defied Fate, and who meant to be happy in his own way.

To the belated peasant tramping homeward beside the lesser Avon, Ringwood Abbey in the December gloaming must have looked as like an enchanted palace as it is possible for any earthly habitation ever to look. Provided always that the peasant had heard of fairyland and its wonderful castles, which shine suddenly out upon wandering princes, luminous with multitudinous windows, and joyous with the buzz and clatter of an army of servants and a court of fine ladies and gentlemen. Ringwood Abbey was all ablaze with wax candles, and reflected its Gothic casements in yonder sedgy stream until it seemed to outshine the stars in the cold clear winter sky. This earthly illumination was so much nearer than the stars, and to the agricultural labourer tramping homeward after a day at the plough-tail was suggestive of pleasanter thoughts than were inspired by yonder cold and distant lights of heaven. Ringwood Abbey meant broken victuals in abundance, and money flung about recklessly by the Squire and his London guests. It meant horse and hound, and all the concomitants of a big hunting-stable. It meant custom for every

little tradesman in the village, and charities on a large scale to the poor. It meant beauty and splendour and stateliness and music to gladden the eye and the ear. It meant bribery at elections, largesse at all times and seasons. It meant all that a large country house, carried on with a noble disregard of cost, can ever mean to the surrounding neighbourhood. Needless, therefore, to add that in this little corner of Hampshire, beside the lesser Avon, Mr. Topsparkle was a very popular gentleman, and Lady Judith a queen among women, a goddess to be worshipped by all who came but to the outermost edge of her enchanted circle.

It was the cheery eventide after a five-o'clock dinner. They dined late at this season on account of the hunting-men, and even then there were some eager sportsmen who would rather miss their dinner than draw bridle before the doom of Reynard; and these came in ravenous to the ten-o'clock supper, full of their adventures over heath and through stream, and a most intolerable nuisance to the non-hunting people.

My Lord Bolingbroke, lolling at ease yonder in

a carved oak armchair, coquetting with Lady Judith, had once been the keenest of sportsmen, and was fond of hunting still, but not quite so reluctant to miss a day's sport as he had been a few years ago.

"Do you remember our wolf-hunt at La Source, the winter you were with us, Arouet?" he asked, following up a conversation half in French and half in English, in which he and Lady Judith, a young gentleman standing in front of the fireplace, and Lord Lavendale had been engaged for the last quarter of an hour. "I had some very fine hounds that Lord Gore sent me, and I was curious to see whether they would attack a wolf boldly, or sneak off as soon as he stood at bay. 'Twas a stirring business for men, horses, and hounds; but, after all, I think there is nothing better than a genuine British fox-hunt."

"In France we study the picturesque and romantic in sport," said the tall slim gentleman lounging in front of the wide mediæval fireplace, whom Bolingbroke addressed sometimes familiarly as Arouet, and anon by his newly assumed name of Voltaire. "You English seem only to regard the practical—so many

miles ridden over, so many foxes slaughtered, so many pheasants shot. With you the chase is a matter of statistics; with us it is a royal ceremony, diversion for kings and courtiers. Our hunting-parties are as stately and picturesque under Louis as they were under Charlemagne. Ours is the poetry of the chase, yours the prose."

"True, my dear Voltaire, but for horseflesh and pedigree hounds we are as far your superiors as you excel us in gold-lace coats and jewelled hunting-knives, or in the noise and fuss of your *curée;* while for hard riding—well, you hunt for the most part in a country that scarcely admits of fine horsemanship."

"It is one of our misfortunes not to be a nation of centaurs, my lord," answered Voltaire lightly and in English, which he spoke admirably, although he dropped into his own language occasionally. "I envy you English gentlemen your superb capacity for out-door sports and your noble independence of intellectual amusements. Of course I except your lordship from the category of average Englishmen, who devote their days to killing birds and beasts, and

their evenings to the study of blood and murder tragedies by their favourite Shakespeare."

"O, don't be too hard upon our sturdy British taste, my dear friend. We read Shakespeare occasionally, I admit, but we very seldom act his plays. That pretty foolish comedy, *As You Like It*, has never been represented since the author's death; and I protest there are some love-making scenes in it that would not disgrace Dryden or Wycherley."

"Do you know, Monsieur de Voltaire, that I delight in Shakespeare?" said Lady Judith, who sat on a sofa by the fire, fanning herself with a superb listlessness, and leaning down now and then to caress her favourite pug.

"From the moment Lady Judith admires him he is sacred," said the Frenchman gaily; "but you must confess that there is a crudeness about his tragedies, an extravagance of blood and wounds and sudden death, which can hardly stand comparison with such calm and polished compositions as *Phèdre* or *Le Cid*."

"I place Shakespeare infinitely higher than Racine or Corneille, and I consider his tragedies sublime,"

replied Judith, with the air of a woman who has the privilege of being positive even when she is talking nonsense.

"What, that refined and delicate Roman story, for instance—*Titus Andronicus*, and Lavinia with her bleeding stumps, and the profligate blackamoor?"

"O, we give you Lavinia and her stumps," cried Bolingbroke, laughing. "We repudiate *Titus Andronicus*. It is the work of an earlier playwright, to which Shakespeare only gave a few fine touches; and those flashes of genius have made the whole play pass for inspired."

"O, if you are going to repudiate everything coarse and brutal which passes for Shakespeare, and claim only the finer touches for his, you may succeed in establishing him as a great poet. Would that we might all be judged as leniently by future critics! What say you, Mr. Topsparkle? You are a man of cosmopolitan tastes, and have doubtless compared your native playwrights with those of other nations, from Æschylus downwards."

"I care not a jot for the whole mass of English

literature," answered Topsparkle, snapping his taper fingers with an airy gesture; "and as for Shakespeare, I have never soiled my fingers by turning his pages. My mental stamina is not robust enough to cope with his monstrosities."

"And yet you revel in foreign coarseness; you devour Boccaccio and Rabelais," said his wife, with a scornful glance at the pinched painted face and frail figure airing itself before the wide old hearth, set off by a gray and silver brocade suit with scarlet shoulder-knots.

"Ah, my dear Judith, no woman can appreciate the grace of Boccaccio nor the wit of Rabelais. Your sex is seldom delicately critical. A butcher brute, like Shakespeare, pleases you because he conjures up scenes of blood and murder which your imagination can easily realise; but the niceties of wit are beyond your comprehension."

"I would rather have written the *Rape of the Lock* than all Shakespeare's plays and poems to boot. 'Tis the best mock-heroic poem that ever was written," said Voltaire, pleased to compliment Lord Bolingbroke by praising his friend. To the exile,

the favour of the Lord of Dawley was not altogether unimportant, and Arouet had been on a footing of friendship with Bolingbroke and his wife for some years, a favoured guest at his lordship's château near Orleans. He had sat at Bolingbroke's feet, and imbibed his opinions.

The *Henriade* was still awaiting publication, and Francis Arouet had an eye to his subscription-list; a man at all times supple and adroit, ever able to make the best of every situation, dexterous alike as wit and poet, courtier, lover, speculator, flushed with the small social successes of his brilliant youth, secure in the friendship of royal duchesses and *roué* princes, accepted in a society far above his birth, envied and hated by the malignant few—witness M. de Rohan's brutal retaliation—but petted and caressed by the many. Who could wonder that such a man, accustomed to float easily on the very crest of the wave, should be quite at home at Ringwood Abbey, oppressed neither by Bolingbroke's intellectual superiority nor by Lady Judith's insolent beauty?

"Nothing can excel perfection," answered Bolingbroke blandly. "My little friend's poem is an

entire and perfect chrysolite; but it is perfection in miniature. I hope to see Pope excel on a larger scale and with a loftier theme. He is capable of writing a great philosophical poem, which shall place him above Lucretius."

"Hang up philosophy! I only care for Pope when he is personal," said Lady Judith. "He is like that other small creature, the adder, only of consequence when he stings."

"One would suppose he had stung you," retorted her husband.

"No, I have not yet been assailed in print. My time is to come, I suppose. But last summer, when all the world was at Twit'nam, there was not a day passed that I did not hear of some venomous shaft which Poet Pug had let fly at one of my friends. No doubt he is just as spiteful about me, only one's friends don't repeat such things to one's face."

"Not to such a face as yours, madam," said the Frenchman. "Malevolence itself must yield to the magic of incomparable charms."

The conversation meandered on in the same trifling strain, Lavendale silent for the most part, stand-

ing in the shadow of the carved oak mantelpiece and casting uneasy glances from time to time towards his hostess, who seemed too much occupied by Lord Bolingbroke to be aware of anybody else's presence, save when she flung some casual speech into the current of idle talk. It was but eight o'clock, and they had dined at five. Seldom did that deep drinker, Henry St. John, leave the table so early. To-night he had not stayed to finish his second bottle of Burgundy ere he joined Lady Judith in the drawing-room, and had given the signal for the breaking up of the party, much to the disappointment of Sir Tilbury Haskell, an honest Hampshire squire, who had heard of Bolingbroke as a four-bottle man, and had hoped to make a night of it in such distinguished company. Mr. Topsparkle had that Continental sobriety which is always offensive to Englishmen, and Voltaire was equally temperate. Sir Tilbury rolled his ponderous carcass to the billiard-room to snore on a sofa until supper-time, when there would be a well-furnished table for the sportsmen and more Champagne and Burgundy.

Bolingbroke was charmed with his hostess. That

proud beauty, in its glorious prime of early womanhood, made him for the moment forgetful of his accomplished French wife, who was just then invalided at Bath, where he was to join her in a few days. It was not that he was unfaithful to his wife even in thought, but that his vanity hungered for new conquests. The triumphant Alcibiades of Anne's reign had become the boastful libertine who would fain be credited with new successes in the hour when he feels his seductive power on the wane.

This evening hour found Lord Bolingbroke in his lightest mood, warmed with wine, expansive, happy; but the cold winter daylight had seen him seated at his desk, thoughtful and laborious, writing the first number of the *Craftsman*, a newspaper of which he and William Pulteney were to be joint editors and proprietors, and which was to be launched almost immediately. That noble brow, now so bland and placid, had but a few hours ago been crowded with eager and vengeful thoughts, and was even at this moment but the smooth mask of an ambition that never slept, of a craft that never ceased from plotting, of a resolute determination to succeed at the expense of every finer

feeling and of every loftier scruple. That deep and thrilling voice, which to-night breathed soft nothings into Judith's ear, had but a week ago been insinuating slanders against Walpole into the complacent ear of the King's favourite, her Grace of Kendal, ever a willing listener to the courtier who would weight his arguments with gold.

Lavendale watched yonder handsome profligate with a jealous eye. Yes, Judith listened as if with pleasure to those insidious addresses. The lovely eyes sparkled, the lovely lips smiled.

"She is an arrant coquette," thought Lavendale. "Years have made her charms only more seducing, her manners only more reckless. She may be laughing in her sleeve at yonder middle-aged Lothario; but it pleases her to fool him to the top of his bent—pleases her most, perhaps, to know that I am standing by and suffering damnable tortures."

Judith looked up at that moment, almost as if in answer to his thought, and their eyes met.

"I protest you have quite a disconsolate air, Lord Lavendale!" she exclaimed. "What has become of your charmer, and how is it you are

not in close attendance upon her? I saw her wander off to the music-room directly after dinner, and I believe your umbra—Mr. What-d'ye-call-him—went with her. Mr. What-d'ye-call-him is fonder of music than you are."

"My friend Herrick Durnford is in all things more accomplished than I."

"If he is, you had better keep a closer watch upon your own interests," said Judith, shaking her fan at him.

"I have nothing so sordid as interest to consider at Ringwood Abbey. I am here only for pleasure. *Fay ce que vouldras* is my motto, as it was with the monks of that other abbey we know of."

"And a devilish good motto it is, Lavendale," exclaimed Topsparkle. "'Fore Gad I have a mind to get those cheery words hewn on the front of the stone porch, or inscribed on parchment and fastened on the lintel of the door, in the Jewish fashion."

"You had better not," said Bolingbroke; "your friends might interpret the inscription too literally, and stay here for ever. Try it not upon me, Topsparkle, unless you would have me a fixture. For a

man like myself, who is wearied of worldly strife and has renounced ambition, there could be no more tempting cloister than Ringwood Abbey."

"Your lordship cannot stay here too long, or come here too often," answered Topsparkle; "but I doubt the French saying holds good in this case, *reculer pour mieux sauter*, and that when Lord Bolingbroke talks of the cloister, he is on the eve of restoring a dynasty, and of changing the face of Europe."

"No, Topsparkle, 'tis only Peterborough who has those large ideas, who parcels out the world in a letter, as if with a FIAT and the breath of his mouth it could be accomplished; and who flies from court to court with meteoric speed, only to embroil the government that sent him, and make confusion worse confounded. And as for restoring a dynasty, the hour is past. Atterbury and I might have done it thirteen years ago had our colleagues but shown a little pluck. High Church and a Stuart would have been a safe cry against a Lutheran and a stranger—witness the temper of the mob at Sacheverell's trial. There was your true test. The people were heart and soul for

James III., and had we brought him home then, he might have made as glorious an entrance as Rowley himself. But we had to do with palterers, and we lost our chance, Topsparkle; and now—well, King George has lived down the worst of his unpopularity, and Walpole is a deuced clever fellow, and my very good friend, to whom I owe the nicely measured mercy of my King. The chance has gone, friends, the chance is lost. The year '15 only made matters worse by showing the weakness of the cause. 'Tis all over. Let us go to the music-room. Your young friend, Squire Bosworth's heiress, has the voice of a nightingale."

"You had better come to the dining-hall, my lord," said Topsparkle. "Our hunting friends will have found their way home by this time, and we can taste a bottle of Burgundy while they take their snack of chine or venison pasty."

"No, I will drink no more till supper-time," answered Bolingbroke. "There is a novel sensation in temperance which is deucedly agreeable. And then I delight in your snug little suppers, which recall Paris and the Regent. Alas, to think that worthy

fellow is no more! Half the glory of the French capital expired when my poor friend Philip sank in an apoplexy, with his head upon the knees of the pretty Duchesse de Phalaris. It was a sorry change from such a man to one-eyed Bourbon, with his savage manners, brutal alike in his loves and his animosities. And now we have Peace-at-any-price Fleury, whose humour admirably suits my pacific friend Sir Robert. But let us to the music-room."

"Nay, my lord, what say you to a hand at quadrille? The tables are ready in the next room."

"I'm with you, Topsparkle. I'm your man."

"Now, is it not strange that Mr. Topsparkle, who raves about every Italian squaller that Handel and Heidegger import for us, should be supremely indifferent to one of the sweetest voices I ever heard!" exclaimed Lady Judith, appealing to the circle in general. "I cannot induce him to be interested in that charming Mrs. Bosworth, who is so pretty and who sings so delightfully."

"O, but she is only an Englishwoman," said Voltaire. "I find that in this country it is a

vulgar thing to admire native merit, especially in music."

"Yes, but Topsparkle is cosmopolitan. I have seen him make much of a ploughboy who happened to have a fine alto voice, stand the little wretch beside his organ and teach him to sing an air of Lully's, listening with as much rapture as to Farinelli himself. Why, then, should he refuse to admire Mrs. Bosworth, who has as lovely a voice as ever I heard, and who is as much a fanatic about music as he is himself? Nay, he goes further than not admiring; he has an air of positive aversion when the dear girl chances to approach him."

Topsparkle's face changed as much as any face so thickly enamelled could change under the influence of angry feelings. He turned towards his wife scowlingly, began to speak, checked himself abruptly, and then with his airy French shrug said lightly, "All sensitive people have their caprices, my dear Judith; one of mine is not to like this charming personage whom you and your friends rave about. I hope I have not been uncivil to the young lady. I should

die of mortification could I deem I had been discourteous to a pretty woman and my guest."

"No, you have not been actually uncivil: but your looks of aversion have not escaped me, though I trust they have escaped her," answered Judith.

"At the worst I have not the evil eye. My glances do not slay."

Lavendale strolled off to the music-room, a noble apartment, which had originally been a chapel, and which retained its vaulted roof and frescoed walls, in all the richness of restored colouring and precious metal. At one end stood an organ built by the Antignati in the fifteenth century; at the other was an instrument in which the art of organ-building had been brought to the highest perfection by the renowned Christopher Müller. The central portion of the room was occupied by the finest harpsichord of modern manufacture, and by a choice collection of older instruments of the same type, from the primitive dulcimer to the more developed spinet. Scattered about the spacious apartment were chairs and couches of the last luxurious French fashion, in all the florid richness of that elaborate style which

we still recognise as Louis Quatorze, and which was then the latest development of the upholsterer's art.

Irene was seated at the harpsichord, and Herrick Durnford was standing by her side; but the heiress was not unguarded, for Lady Tredgold sat near, slumbering peacefully behind her fan, and giving full play to the mechanism of her admirable digestive organs after a copious dinner. For the rest, the room was empty.

The singer was just finishing a dainty little ballad by Tom Durfey as Lavendale entered.

"Is it not pretty?" she asked, looking shyly up at Herrick, whose taciturn air vexed her a little and mystified her much.

"Yes, it is charming, like everything you sing."

"How dolefully you say that!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, I confess to being doleful, the very incarnation of gloom. O Rena, forgive me, I am the most miserable of men! Here I am in this great gaudy tavern, for such a house is no better than an inn —seeing you every day, hearing your voice, near you and yet leagues away—never daring to address you

freely save in such a chance moment as this, while your vigilant kinswoman sleeps; here am I, your adorer, your slave, but a pauper who dare not ask for your heart, though his own is irrevocably yours. To ask you to marry me would be to ask you to ruin yourself irretrievably."

"You might at least venture the question," said Rena softly, looking down at the keys of the harpsichord. "Perhaps I have a mind to do some wild rash act that will beggar me. I am weary of hearing myself talked of as an heiress. My father has been very good to me, and I am very fond of him. I should fear much more to grieve him than to lose a fortune. I could not be a rebellious daughter; better that I should break my heart than break his: and he has told me that all his hopes of the future are centred in me. Could you not talk to him, could you not persuade him—?" she added falteringly, touching the notes at random here and there in her confusion.

"Persuade him to accept a penniless newspaper hack for his only daughter's husband! Alas, I fear not, Rena. If I could but find some swift sudden

way to fame and fortune—in the senate, for instance! A fine speaker may make his name in one debate, and stand out ever after from the common ruck; and I think I could speak fairly well on any question that I had at heart."

"O, pray be a speaker; go into Parliament directly!" exclaimed Rena eagerly.

"Dear child, it is not so easy. It needs money, which I have not, or powerful friends, and I have but one, who is also my rival. Alas, I fear a seat in Parliament is as unattainable for me as the moon. And the age of adventure is past, in which a man might grow suddenly rich by dabbling in South Sea stock. 'Twas said the Prince of Wales made forty thousand pounds on 'Change at that golden season, and Lord Bolingbroke restored his fortune by a lucky purchase of Mississippi stocks. But it is all over now, Rena."

"I have heard it said 'twas by South Sea stock my father made the greatest part of his fortune," said the girl thoughtfully. "If it is so I wish he were poorer, for one must but think of those poor

creatures who paid thousands for shares that proved scarce worth hundreds."

"That is only the fortune of Exchange Alley, Irene: and from the speculator's standpoint your father's honour is uncompromised and his conscience may be easy. Yet I grant 'tis no pleasant thought to consider those simple widows and foolish rustic spinsters who risked their all in that fatal adventure, fondly believing that an endless tide of wealth was to flow from those far-off seas, and that there was to be no ebb to that golden stream. But indeed, Irene, I would with all my heart you were poorer. I would Squire Bosworth had dabbled in all the rottenest schemes of those wild days, from the company for extracting silver from lead to the company for a wheel for perpetual motion, so long as his losses brought our fortunes level."

"You should not wish me poor," she answered. "If my father's wealth is but honestly come by, I should be proud to share some of it with one I loved. And if you can but persuade him—"

"Well, I will try, dearest, though I know that to avow my aim will be to banish me from this dear

presence for ever—unless you can be bold enough to risk your fortune and disobey your father."

They had been talking in subdued tones so as not to awaken Lady Tredgold, at whom they glanced from time to time to make sure that her placid slumbers were unbroken. Lord Lavendale stood at the end of the room, in the shadow of the great organ, watching those two heads as they bent to each other, Herrick's arm on the back of Irene's chair, the girl's head drooping a little, bowed by the weight of her modesty. He was quite able to draw his own inferences from such a group.

"Is it thus the land lies," he said to himself, "and shall I spoil sport by a loveless wooing—I, whose heart, or whatever remnant of heart is left, belongs to another? Better let youth and true love have their own way—unless Herrick is fortune-hunting. But I know him too well to suspect him of any sordid motive. He is a better man than I, though we have lived the same bad lives together."

He gave a little cough, and walked towards that central space where the lovers sat in front of the harpsichord. They started, and moved farther apart at

the sound of his footsteps, and Lady Tredgold opened her eyes and blinked at the company like an owl, exclaiming, "Can I really have been asleep? That ballad of Rameau's is the sweetest thing I have heard for an age, Irene. Lord Lavendale, you must positively hear it: I know you love old French music."

"All melody from such lips is entrancing, and such lips can speak only music," said his lordship, bowing to Irene, who had risen, rosy red in her confusion, and who acknowledged his compliment with a low curtsy.

END OF VOL. I.

LONDON:
ROBERTSON AND SONS, LIMITED, PRINTERS, PANCRAS ROAD, N.W.

QK113.C.10

121

THE LIBRARY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LOS ANGELES

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
AA 000 374 156 8